



The Power of Love by mileventhdoctor

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Summary: Takes place post-season 3, but not following the events of my last Mileven story. It centers around Mike and El mainly, but there will be several other characters heavily involved in the plot. Let's just say it's going to involve a lot of telekinesis and rescue missions and leave it at that. (This story is dedicated to Olivia, Freya, Valerie, and John. I love you all so much!)

1. Home Is Where The Heart Is

Okay, so you guys are actually going to kill me because I left you all on a major cliffhanger with the last chapter, but I just came up with this chapter idea that I really loved and wanted to precede "I'm In Love, Thanks To You," so that's what this is. Also, this is the longest chapter I've ever written and I feel the need to apologize in advance because it's literally SOOO fucking long! Kudos to those of you who end up reading it all in one sitting, though please know that I don't expect you to at all! Seriously, I feel so bad about how long this is. Imagine how much of a pain in the ass it was for me to edit it though, lol! Anyway, I worked really hard on this and even decided to shift POVs, which are indicated in brackets whenever they change, but I think you guys will really like it. Also, this chapter is dedicated to one of my best friends who, like El, has been feeling really homesick lately. This one's for you, girlie! You know who you are...(P.S. Shoutout to mileveness for the concept of kissing the tattoo. I only wish I had come up with that myself because it's so damn cute!)

"No one leaves here without getting cleared by the paramedics first, is that understood?" the chief firefighter ordered and checked for understanding.

Hawkins, a place where chaos brewed like a wicked witch's potion- a recipe for disaster. It was when the town fell silent that you knew for sure something was up. But this night wasn't like that.

In front of the rusty, red sky lied a cloud of smoke coming from the very top of the building. It was almost as if evil was still lurking somewhere nearby. And there were people yelling and being evacuated out of Starcourt, and firetrucks, ambulances, and police cars pulling up every which way, followed by their wailing sirens which flashed with red light.

Seeing that all of the police officers and deputies were standing around with their feet planted on the ground and blank looks on their faces, the fire chief took charge.

"Hey, have you seen Chief Hopper around anywhere?" he asked.

The other deputies shrugged and shook their heads, leaving the chief with no other choice than to take the matter into his own hands.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Go make yourselves useful! *points to Powell* You: Go look for Hopper, and you: *points to Callahan* go find some answers. Ask people questions and find out what all happened tonight. As for the rest of you, *sighs* just make sure that everyone's been evacuated out of that mall. We have no time to waste," he said.

"*claps hands repeatedly* Let's go! Move it people!" he continued.

"You heard the man!" said Powell.

Among all of the stretchers, ice packs, and paramedics were army men with guns, answering Hopper's call too little too late. And with them were Joyce and Murray, dressed in, oddly enough, Russian uniforms.

Before having exited the building to safety, Callahan caught Joyce on her way out and asked her if she knew where Hop was and if he had been involved. She responded, teary-eyed and struck with grief as she informed him of his death. His eyebrows drooped with sadness, his lips pursed with pity and after letting it all sink in, he phoned Powell on his walkie and told him there was no need to look anymore. He was gone...for good.

[El's POV]

As I sat beside Mike, on the ambulance's edge, a million thoughts ran through my head. I thought about many things that night and I just didn't know which thing to worry about first, but with a shock blanket draped over top of us, I felt like the best thing for me to do was just breathe and try to calm down because if I didn't now, then I never would. So, I stayed put, bundled under that large old blanket with the feeling of his shoulder pressing against the side of mine. I felt so safe in his company. I couldn't think of one person I would've rather been with in a crisis like that. But even so, I just couldn't shake the feeling that something was missing.

And then I eyed Joyce. She was frantic. She looked like she was trying to find someone. And not long after that, I watched as Will pulled off his blanket and immediately ran to her. Seeing Will and Joyce reunite was heartening, but then it hit me and I couldn't help but wonder- Where was Hop?

[3rd Person POV]

She got up. She looked from her left to her right, her hands floating by her sides like they didn't know where to be and she didn't know what to do with them. Something wasn't right.

[El's POV]

I could feel her...looking at me. Her hand was clutching over Will's shoulder like she needed something to bear down on. The light of the helicopters hit her just as she whimpered and she looked right in my direction, like she knew how I was going to feel before I felt it. And she did. She knew the most devastating thing and was left to be the bearer of the worst news one could tell- the death of a parent.

I looked at her this time. I knew something was wrong. I looked at her, hoping to find some answers.

[3rd Person POV]

El shifted her weight to her right foot, her face relaxing into a look of worry and wonder, but it was the expression on Joyce's face that said it all.

[El's POV]

And then I stopped. My shoulders dropped like the straps of a backpack that loosen the longer and more often you wear it because *I* was worn...worn out.

The light hit her again and she closed her eyes. She couldn't bear to look at me any longer without bursting into tears. I was a pity case now.

[3rd Person POV]

And El's eyebrows came to a slant. Her nose twitched and she started to shake her head involuntarily, her lips pursing in the shape of the word 'no.' Her chin pruned up and her eyelids folded shut and squeezed with the hurt that comes from knowing the truth- Hopper was dead.

[3rd Person POV]

Hopper's death left El feeling so helpless. With him no longer around, was her home even her home anymore or was she homeless? She didn't know.

After processing the news and being comforted by Joyce, she decided to find out for herself:

"*shivers* J-J-Joyce?"

"Yes, sweetie?" she said, rubbing her back.

"What-What do I do? Where am I supposed to go now?"

"Well, *sighs* let's see...*ponders* You could either stay with me and the boys or I could spend the night with you back at the cabin if that would make you more comfortable."

"And go back there?! With all of his stuff lying around to remind me of him?"

"Hmm...Maybe you're right. I guess I was just thinking it might be nice to be back in your room and have all of your stuff already with you, but if you're not ready for that just yet, then just say the word!"

"Would this be permanent? Me staying with you?" she asked Joyce.

"Well, I'm not sure yet. That's what we have to figure out still, but if you're worried about not having your stuff with you, you can just borrow my clothes and things for now and we can come back to the cabin another time. Does that suit you?"

"Yes, that's fine."

"We'll figure all of this out, El, don't worry...You're not going to be all

alone again. No matter what happens, I can assure you that much. But let me just talk with the boys real quick, okay? You just stay with Mike for now."

"Okay."

returns to ambulance, sits beside Mike

"What-What's going on? Where's Hopper?" asked Mike.

face reddens, tears begin to roll

And she turned and latched onto him in a hug, crying into his chest. He looked down at the girl holding him, realizing just what had happened. And he drew her into an embrace so tight, hugging her with all of his might and kissing her head as he ran his hands through her hair.

Mike couldn't let El out of his sight, not when she was like this. He just wouldn't have it...Getting to take El home with him, however, wasn't an easy fight at first, as Max had wanted to do the same herself and she and Mike fought to the point that they were practically playing tug-of-war on each side of her.

"She's coming with me!" said Max.

"No, she's coming with me!"

"I'm her best friend!"

"Yeah, well I'm her boyf- I mean, not that, I'm her-her-"

"Her-her what? See, even *you* don't know what you are to her!"

"Fine, I'm her ex-boyfriend! Ya happy now?"

"Not quite, but I will be soon," she said cockily.

"Oh, you really think so, huh?"

"Yep."

"Well, let's just settle this and ask El then!"

"Let's do it!"

"Who will it be, El? Me...or Max?"

"I don't-I don't know..."

"El, let me make this easy for you. If you come home with me, it'll be an actual sleepover, but if you go home with him, you'll have to stay in the fort in his basement *turns to Mike* LIKE A DOG!"

"Hey, at least I don't treat her like a dog, ordering her around, making her do special *tricks* without paying attention to how much it's wearing her out!"

"God, sometimes you can be such an assho-"

"Oh my god, just shut up! Both of you! I appreciate the concern, but can you just give the rivalry bullshit a rest for two seconds?! I mean, *really!* You two are unbelievable sometimes..." said El.

uncomfortable silence

"Yeah, yeah, we're sorry. We were just being selfish, sorry," Mike nervously said.

"Yeah, sorry, El. We really didn't mean it like that."

"*exhales* Thank you!" she said, relieved. "*sighs* Look, Max, you know you're my best friend and I don't want to make it seem like I would ever choose Mike over you because that's not what this is and that's not how I feel at all, but I *have* known him longer and if it comes down to me choosing one of you to take care of me tonight, I will probably choose him. You have to understand, there's just so much history between us...I lived in his house for a week! But that's not even why I really think it's better that I stay with him than with you, it's really just that I'm aware of the fact that Billy didn't make it out alive either *sniffles* and I'm sorry to remind you of that in bringing this up, but I'd hate to put something like this on you and your parents in your time of mourning. I know we're going through the same thing, but I think your family needs *you* right now, not me."

"I get it, El. I'm not hurt, I mean, I am, but not about this. Can I talk

to you about something real quick though?"

"Yeah, sure," she said, walking off with her.

Mike throws hands up in annoyance

"El, are you sure about this? You and Mike? You're not even back toge-"

El covers mouth

"Shh! He might hear you...Yes, I'm sure. Besides, I think this might be a chance to fix things between us."

"Okay, well, in that case, go for it!"

"Thanks," she said, getting a little excited.

"On one condition..." she said throwing up one finger.

"What's that?" asked El.

"You have to promise to tell me EVERYTHING afterward! I want every. little. detail."

"You can count on me," she said.

"Ah, ah, ah...I didn't hear a promise, missy!"

"I promise," she said with a giggle.

"Good. Well, go get him, girl!"

"*laughs* You just try and stop me!" she joked.

both laugh

"Oh, but El?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm real sorry about Hop...My dad doesn't live in the same house as me anymore. He's still in California, all by himself, and I sure miss

him, but losing him would hurt on a whole other level and I can't even imagine how awful you must be feeling right now...Just know that I love you and am thinking of you, okay? I know I'm not always the easiest person to talk to, but I'm always here if you need anything."

"Thanks, Max. I love you too and I'm so sorry about Billy...I know he was kind of a jerk to you sometimes, but he was still your brother and losing him must've been anything but easy. I'm always here for you too if you need me."

"Thanks, El. Well, what do you say? Hug?"

"Sure," said El, pulling her in for a big one.

"See you later," she said, rubbing her back and letting go.

"Take care," said El.

"You too," said Max.

both walk back to Mike

directs to Mike Before I go, I gotta talk to you about something real quick," said Max.

"Me? O-Okay..." he reacted, surprised. "*turns to El* Hang tight."

pulls Mike aside, whispers Mike, as much as you annoy the shit out of me, you're a good guy and I know how you feel about her, so I'm only going to say this once. *sighs* El's really vulnerable right now and if you take advantage of her in any way, I *will* kick your ass. Are we clear about that?" said Max.

"You know I would never do tha-"

Max glares

"I *said* are we clear?"

"Crystal!" he exclaimed with vexed enthusiasm.

"Good. You take care of her, alright?"

"You know I will."

"Thanks," she said.

both walk back

"Alright, well, bye, you two."

"Bye!" said El.

"*gives single wave* See ya, Max," Mike casually said.

Not long after she left, El turned to Mike and asked:

"What was all of that about?"

"Oh, it's nothing bad...We were just working something out. Nothing to worry about. I'd tell you if it was."

"Okay, I trust you," she said.

smiles

"She was just being a good friend. You know, I think that's why we have such a hard time getting along sometimes...because we're both so protective of you, but in different ways. Clearly, we just have a hard time sharing you."

"Aww, that's so sweet...I don't even know what I'd do without you guys!"

"Yeah...but hey! While we're at it, what uh- what were you two girls gossiping about over there?"

"I'll never tell!" she teased.

"*chuckles* You guys work everything out?"

"Yep, we're good. I'm still mad at you for being a *lightly hits collarbone* dill hole though..."

"Damn! Just when I thought I was finally on your good side again, I somehow managed to find a way to screw it up..."

El chuckles

"*grabs hands* Let me make it up to you. Come home with me."

"How can I say no to that sweet face..." she said, pinching his cheek.

looks at the ground and blushes

Meanwhile, Joyce walked up to both of the boys, saying:

"Boys, I need you to listen to me very carefully. I don't know how to tell you this exactly, but *sighs* Hopper is dead. *pauses* When I closed the gate, he was trapped with the machinery and *sobs* he didn't make it out alive. *sobs more*"

"Jesus!" said Jonathan.

"Oh, Mom..." said Will, feeling for her. "*pauses, gulps* Are-Are you okay?"

"*sniffles, shoulders tense up in a shrug* I don't know what I am, I just- *inhales* I'm- *sighs, hands hit sides* devastated...He and I had been through so much! *breaks out into tears*"

"Gosh, what's El gonna do now?" asked Jonathan.

"Well, that's actually what I came to talk to you boys about. I don't have a real answer for you just yet, but I'm going to talk with her first and for now, I need you, Jonathan, to take Will home. I will either meet you two there later tonight or tomorrow depending on whether El would rather me stay the night with her at her own house or ours."

"Wait, so what does this mean? Is she going to live with us?"

"For now she is...until we figure out a more permanent solution. Now, I don't know what exactly is going to happen and we're not going to decide all of that tonight, but it seems like we're her best bet and for all I know, her only option, so I don't want it to come as a surprise to you if that ends up being the case. Just be ready either way, okay?"

"*nods* Yeah. *pauses* Yeah, okay," said Will.

"Of course, whatever she needs," Jonathan added.

"Now, *those* are the boys that I raised!" she said, laying a hand on each of their shoulders.

"Mo-om!" said Will, embarrassed.

"Oh, you're just such good sports! I love you both very much," she said pulling them both in for a hug.

"We love you too, Mom," said Jonathan.

"Alright, well, take care of yourselves and I'll see you boys soon."

"Don't worry, Mom. We will. See you soon," said Jonathan.

"Good luck!" said Will.

"Thanks," she said, winking and giving a slight smile through her tears.

Joyce already struggled with separation anxiety from Will, but she couldn't worry about that right now. Right now, she had El to worry about.

She walked around to find El now with the Wheelers, clinging onto Mike.

"El, sweetie, how 'bout we go for a drive and grab something to eat? We can talk more then."

"Oh, *right!* Joyce was supposed to take me home...*chuckles nervously* Forgot to mention that part..." El said to Mike.

"El, sidebar," he said.

"Huh?"

tugs shirtsleeve, steps away

"So, you're telling me I have to fight for her permission now too?" he

continued.

"I'm afraid so," she said biting her nails.

"Well, lucky for you, *I'm* on the debate team."

"Why does that not surprise me!" she teased.

both walk back

"Hey, sorry. We're back," said El.

"That's okay. So, what do you say, kiddo?"

"Actually, Ms. Byers, we were going to let her spend the night in my basement...unless you'd rather her stay with you," said Mike.

"El, is this what you want?" Joyce asked.

nods

"As long as it's fine with Karen, then it's fine with me," she said, despite knowing how strongly Hopper would've been opposed to this.

"Of course! El's always welcome," she said.

"*to Karen* When would it be best for me to pick her up? 11:30?" Joyce asked.

"Sure! Sounds great."

"Alright then. *turns to El, rubs side of cheek* I'll see you tomorrow, sweetie."

"See you," she said with a slight smile.

starts to walk away

"Joyce?" she called out.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you," she said.

smiles, winks

"That was *way* too easy," said Mike. "I didn't even have to use my secret weapon!"

"Secret weapon? What secret weapon?"

"Nothing! It's nothing. *shushes* I've already said too much..."

El laughs, rolls eyes

Heading back home, Joyce set her keys down on the kitchen counter, greeted by her boys, who peppered her with questions.

"Where's El?" asked Will.

"Don't worry, she's fine. She's staying with Mike and his family. I'm going to pick her up tomorrow morning."

"Okay," said Jonathan.

"So...What now?" asked Will.

"I don't- I don't know. I just need t- I need to lie down."

"Okay, we'll be here if you need us," said Jonathan.

"Thanks, sweetie."

walks off

And the boys stayed up talking for quite a bit that night. They didn't think they'd be able to catch any sleep, but at some point or another, they dozed off. Joyce, however, wasn't so lucky, and neither was El...

Back at the Wheeler House:

"El, hun, do you want any pain meds for your leg?" asked Mrs. Wheeler.

"I think I'm good for now, thanks, but I might later. *chuckles to self* Honestly, I don't think any drug could lessen the pain I'm feeling right now..."

"Oh, bless your heart! *sighs* Well, if you need anything, you just let us know."

"Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler."

"My pleasure, sweetheart."

El and Mike then walked upstairs to get ready for bed, even though they planned to stay up talking, just like Will and Jonathan had.

"Do you usually shower in the morning or at night?" asked Mike.

"Morning."

"Okay, sounds good. Oh, and I already asked Nance. She said you could borrow some of her clothes if you-"

He was suddenly distracted by El, who wandered over to his room with a dazed, lost look on her face.

"Wan-ted..." he finished softly to himself.

Quickly grabbing a pair of Nancy's shorts, he followed El into his room. She sat on the side of his bed, staring into blank space, a state which she once saw Billy in. But then, directing her attention to Mike's deep, brown eyes, she snapped out of it completely.

fumbles through drawers and closet

"This okay?" he asked, presenting a sweatshirt of his and pajama bottoms to go along with it.

nods

It was almost like she had gone back, back to the old El, the nearly mute, abandoned, silent El, and he was reliving his tween days all over again.

"Well, I'll leave you to it," he said, getting up to walk away.

"Mike *grabs arm*," she said anxiously. "No. Don't."

"You don't want me to lea-"

"No," she said, unfastening the ends of her suspenders and sliding them over and off of her shoulders.

Looking down at her chest, she began to unbutton her yellow, tribal-printed shirt.

"El," Mike said, stopping her with a touch of the shoulder.

"Yes?"

"Are you sure you want me to be around? I mean, is this okay?"

"Mike, don't be so dramatic! *sighs* Look, I know it's a little awkward, but I just, I can't be alone. Not right now..." she said, resorting to her sad state.

"No, no, I get it. I won't go anywhere, don't worry," he said. "I'll just cover my eyes to give you some privacy."

"Okay, thanks," she said, continuing to unbutton.

"*covers face, peers through hand* Must *pauses* look. Too *pauses* beautiful," Mike joked.

"*gasps* Mike! You naughty boy!" she teased, hitting him lightly with her shirt.

He said all of this in an attempt to lighten the mood and cheer her up, while also legitimately resisting the urge to stare at her through his fingers.

"Sorry, I just couldn't help myself!"

giggles, blushes

"No, I mean it though. You're stunning."

"Thank you," she said, looking at him seriously, with nothing but love behind her gaze.

"Of course," he said, handing her his sweatshirt and turning around this time to be fair.

puts on shirt and shorts

"Alright, all done. You are free to turn around."

"*takes deep breath, suddenly breaks out into song* *Turn* around, look at-

"Oh no, not this shit again!" she said, covering his mouth.

"*singing* What you-" he continued, muffled by the palm of her hand.

"You're not going to stop until I sing with you, are you?" she asked.

shakes head no

El sighs, lets go

"SEE-E-E-E-E-E-E-E!" he continued. "In her face- *holds her face"

"I hardly even know the words! I've only heard it once!" El protested.

"*whispers* Oh, sure you do! C'mon."

"The mirror of your dre-e-e-e-ams!" he continued.

El huffs and rolls eyes

"Fine, but only until the chorus," she said.

"Actually, I don't even think I know it that far, other than the never-ending story part *laughs*," he admitted.

both burst out into laughter

"Huh! I just realized that that was the last song my dad ever heard... *giggles hysterically* I mean, can you imagine? He was probably ready to explode any second then! *laughs twice more, quickly turns to tears*" she said, not realizing that the particular way she referred to his anger would, in turn, mirror his death.

"*shakes head in tears* I'm sorry, Mike...I was really hoping it wouldn't be like this, with me crying the whole time, but I have this

bad feeling that there's going to be a lot more of that tonight," she continued.

"El, don't be sorry! Your dad *died* tonight...No one expects you to be up and lively! It's all still fresh, still sinking in and there's nothing wrong with being sad. I'd be more concerned if you weren't. Hell, I'm just glad that you're laughing and smiling at all!"

"*smiles, wipes tears, sniffles* Thanks," she said, a little relieved.

"Of course!"

After calming down a tad, she turned to him and asked:

"Aren't you going to change too?"

"Oh, no, I take my showers at night, so I'll just change after I shower before bed, but I'm sure you'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"*blushes* Shut up," she said softly, in a pouty, playful way.

Mike laughs, laughter fades

"So..." said Mike.

"So..." said El.

"El, I know we just got finished talking about all of this, but I'm just so so sorry...I seriously am, and I know you're probably really tired of hearing that...You've certainly had your share of sorries for one night, but I just- I don't know, I feel so bad and...useless. I mean, is there anything I can do? Because you know I'd do anything to make you happy."

shrugs

"Are you sure? There's really nothing else I can do for you?"

"I don't think so."

"Just name something, anything!"

"I'm sorry, Mike, I just don't even know what to do with myself at this

point...I think I just need a distraction, something to take my mind off of it."

"Okay. Well, we could watch a movie, just to kind of unwind or um, let's see...What else? *pauses to think* I mean, depending on how you're feeling, we could just...talk. It doesn't have to be about what happened if you don't want it to, but I'll leave that up for you to decide...And if none of that sounds good to you, we could always just call it a night. Whatever you want."

"I-I dunno...I'm-I'm sorry."

"No, don't be! This is kind of a depressing sleepover, isn't it?"

"Yeah, *exhales in a slight laugh* a little bit..." she said, bobbing her head up and down.

He nodded and looked down, but once her hand reached out to touch his face, his attention was brought back to her.

"But not because of you! *rubs cheek with thumb* It's just a lot happened to us today..."

"It did," he said, agreeing. "It definitely did."

reflecting silence

"Hey, uh, how's your leg feeling?"

"It's alright."

"Good," he said, rubbing it. "I'm not hurting it, am I?"

"*chuckles* No, no you're fine. Stop worrying about me!"

"Sorry, *shrugs* it's my job!"

"What about you though? How are you feeling?" she asked.

"What do you mean what about me?"

"You have that awful gash across your face..." she said, reaching the backs of fingers out to stroke it gently.

"Oh, right...*That!* No, I'm fine. I honestly forget that it's there, even though I know it's pretty hard to miss. *chuckles*"

"*smiles* Good," she said, pinching his cheek a little before letting go.

Earlier, when they had first arrived home, it was already very late at night. And they continued to talk for another hour until Mike's mom hollered at them to keep it down. From that point forward, they just whispered.

"So, what do guys do at sleepovers anyway?" asked El, putting a hand to her face in interest as she made conversation.

"*rolls lips* Gosh, I don't even know really. *scratches head* I mean, it's pretty chill. We just kind of hang out, you know, maybe play some games, of course, it used to be D&D mainly, but now we play more video games. Um, sometimes we'll play small pranks on like Nancy or Dad or a neighbor or something. Sometimes even on each other! We might draw on the face of the person who falls asleep first. Oh, and we eat a lo-hah-hot of food! We'll usually have pizza for dinner and then when we watch a movie, we'll make popcorn, and then basically we just eat a shitton of snacks and junk food throughout the entire night. A lot of spur-of-the-moment wrestling matches too."

"Wow. *laughs a little* That's um...interesting!"

"And of course we talk about *girls* and stuff too," he said, raising his eyebrows at the mention of girls.

"Hah, talking about boys is like the main event at a girl's sleepover, I mean, I've only ever had sleepovers with Max, but still..."

"That still counts...Tell me about them. What were they like?"

"*says in a surprised but happy tone* Okay! *smiles* Well, it started with us just singing and dancing to music in my room...A lot of pop, mostly Madonna."

"Of course, of course," said Mike. "Go on!"

"And then we read some magazines, you know, Tiger Beat. And

um...then we started talking about *boys*..."

"So, me and Lucas?"

"Yeah, basically. I mean, it started with Ralph Macchio and then led to that."

"Ah, Karate Kid. Great movie."

"Never seen it," she said.

"Wait, what?! You've seriously never seen Karate Kid?"

"Nope."

"Then how did you know about Ralph Macchio?"

"Oh, I was just flipping through Tiger Beat and Max caught me staring at a photo of him."

"Ah, I see how it is..."

"Well, we were broken up, so-"

"So, you were already shopping for other boyfriends?"

And she hit him back with:

"Oh, like you were 'shopping' for Nana?"

"Touché!" he said.

playfully nudge at each other

"Mike, stop! You didn't let me fin-ish," she said, giggling.

"Oh, so, there's more?" he asked, showing interest.

"Mike," she said in a chastised way.

"No, please! Tell me more about you and this Ralph Macchio!"

"You know what? Forget it. I'm not even going to tell you anymore..."

she said, crossing her arms with slight satisfaction over his disappointment.

"Okay, *fine*! I'm sorry, I'm sorry. *chuckles* What were you going to say?"

"I was going to say *pauses* that...*pauses again* when Max saw me looking at his picture, she started blabbing on about how she bets that he would be a great kisser and then she asked me *swallows* she asked me if you were a good kisser."

"Oh. *Ohhh*!" he said.

She exhaled through her nose in a laugh and nodded, then looked up at him to see how he would react.

"*And you said...*?" he asked eagerly and all in the same tone.

"Don't put me on the spot like that!"

"*chuckles* Sorry, can't help it! I'm just on the edge of my seat!"

"Ugh...*Fine*! *sighs, closes and opens eyes* I said I didn't know because you were my first boyfriend, but if she had asked me now, I probably would've changed my answer..."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," she said, nodding and slightly smiling.

"*To...*?"

"*giggles* To yes, dummy!"

"Good to know," he said, smiling.

"You are too! *pauses* *Really* good," he continued.

"Oh, you're just saying that!" she said, throwing her hand down.

"No, no, *really*, I'm not..."

"Oh...*smiles* Then, thanks," she said, biting her lip and drawing

attention to it.

"The pleasure is all mine..." he said with a smirk.

"Hey! Don't get any ideas, you..."

"Whoops! Too late!" he said.

giggles

"Any-way...We just watched movies and stuff too and read some comic books."

"Ooh! Which ones?"

"Wonder Woman."

"Bitchin'," he said, bobbing his head up and down with a smile.

"Yeah, *pauses* bitchin'," she repeated.

smiles

"So...yeah! That's what they're like."

"Cool!" he said.

"Yeah, *pauses* pretty cool," she said, seeing if he would catch onto her hint at one of his past remarks.

Mike smiles

"God, can you imagine how much Hopper would be flipping out right now if he knew I was here?!" she brought up.

"Oh my god, he'd totally go berserk! I'm *pretty* sure he'd actually kill me...*laughs* He'd be like chasing me around with a gun, yelling 'I SAID 3 INCHES, YOU SON OF A BITCH!'"

She giggled like a schoolgirl...at first. She had been in such a good mood with him around, but then her face suddenly changed. The space between her eyebrows condensed with concern, the crescent of her smile flattening into a line between her quivering lips.

"Hopper..."

And she broke. She broke down, closing her eyes and exhaling through her nose and mouth repeatedly as tears rolled down her cheeks and past her pouting lip. Then she opened them, looking at Mike all red-faced and glassy-eyed.

"Mike, *sobs* I'm sorry..."

"For what?" he asked, rubbing her back.

"For acting like everything's alright when it's clearly not..."

"Oh, El..." he said empathetically, so torn up about the pain she was experiencing. "You don't ever have to pretend to be okay when you're with me..."

Sitting up with his back propped up against the headboard, he reached out and grabbed her hand, stroking it with his thumb. And she looked, first at their hands and then at him. He pulled her towards him and then, removing her arm from the one knee she could fold to her chest, she extended her legs and scooted over to where he was.

Rolling over into his chest, her right arm slid behind his lower back, her left holding his hip. He cuddled her in his arms, holding her left arm in the palm of his right and throwing the other around her neck, his left hand resting gently atop of her sleeve. Her head sunk into the crook of his neck and she just cried as he lightly cradled her back and forth, whispering words of comfort to her.

All time just seemed to fly out the window when it was just the two of them, even when they were no longer in a relationship, as they remained the same for almost 20 minutes...That was until Mike found himself starting to doze off.

"Hey, El?" he asked in mid-yawn.

"Yeah?"

"I'd love to stay up with you, but I'm kind of beat. Could we maybe start heading towards bed?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Okay. Well, I'm going to hop in the shower and hit the sack, so I guess this is goodnight."

"Wait, but Mike, I wanna stay up as long as you stay up..."

"Okay, that's fine. I'll just meet you downstairs afterward."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Okay. How long?"

"Mm...5, 10 minutes. Not too long."

"Alright."

And she walked down the stairs but stopped in mid-step, realizing that she hadn't yet brushed her teeth or flossed. So, she headed back up the steps and knocked on the bathroom door.

door opens

"Something wrong?" Mike asked, his head peering around the creak of the door.

"Oh. No, I just- I need to brush my teeth and floss. Can I come in real quick?"

"No!" he shouted.

"No?" she repeated, confused.

"Yeah, no, sorry. What I meant was- *sighs* You see, I'm kind of *raises eyebrows* half-dressed right now, so um.."

"Oh..." she said, trying to hide her amusement.

"*Yeah!* Let me just- I-I'll let you know when you can come in."

"*laughs* Okay, sorry."

"No worries," he said, shutting the door.

curtain rings slide

"Okay, coast is clear!" he said once done.

"Huh?" she said, not understanding what he meant.

"Come in!"

opens door

El rubs chin

"Hey, Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Um, I don't have a toothbrush with me..."

"*laughs* That's fine, you can just borrow mine."

"Are you sure? I mean, isn't that kind of weird?"

"Not really. I mean, we used to swap spit all the time, right?"

"Yeah, I guess you have a point there, though I think it was a little more meaningful than just that."

"It was," he said, agreeing.

Mike whistles Never-Ending Story

"Where's the toothpaste?"

"*whistling ceases* Huh? Oh, sorry! Cabinet."

"Kay, thanks."

"Mmhm."

Mike winces in pain

"Are you okay?" she asked.

"Oh, yeah, it's just the cut on my face...The water just kind of makes it sting when you wash your face, that's all."

"Aww..." she said.

El was always getting distracted, but sometimes that was a good thing. And wiping the steam off of the mirror glass, she looked inside it, saying:

"Aww, man!"

"What? What is it?" asked Mike.

"Oh, it's nothing."

"*peeks head past curtain* Do I really have to remind you?" he asked, pulling the curtain back once finished speaking.

"About what?"

"Well, *turns off water* as a wise woman once said: *peeps head past curtain* friends don't lie," he said, reaching for his towel on the rack.

"Wise *woman*, huh?" she asked.

"That's right!" he said.

"Well, if you must know... *sighs* I-I got a pimple."

"That's *it*?"

"Well, yeah."

"*laughs* El, we all get pimples! It's not that big a deal."

"Yeah, well, that's easy for you to say! Your skin is perfect."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, *pauses* it *is*."

"Are you even brushing your teeth or did you just come in here to talk?" he asked, drying off before he hopped out.

"Oh. *Right!*" she said, grabbing his toothbrush and squeezing the tube across the top.

And he wrapped the towel around his waist and tucked it in really tightly to avoid any awkwardness that might result from it coming undone. Meanwhile, El, the master procrastinator, *finally* began brushing her teeth.

draws curtain, steps out

El closes eyes in reflex

"*chuckles* El, it's okay, I have a towel on."

"Oh," she said, opening her eyes.

Shirtless, with his head in a towel, he rubbed and shook his wet hair until it was poofy and damp. But when he wasn't looking, *she* was...

There's no harm in checking him out just a tiny bit, right? she had thought to herself. There was already so much history between them.

She slowly moved the brush through her mouth, as if in a trance, her teeth clenching the ends of the bristles just as his gaze met hers.

"What?" he asked, wondering why she was looking at him all funny.

"*spits out toothpaste* Nothing! It's nothing..."

raises eyebrows

"No, really!"

"O-kay..."

And just as El was about to walk over to get the floss out of the cabinet below the sink, Mike was walking in the opposite direction to get his comb from the holster on the wall shelf. Seeing as this was the case, the two somehow always managed to make the same moves in

the same direction, blocking each other in this unchoreographed little dance.

"Scuse me," Mike said in a husky, gravelly voice.

grabs her waist, starts to lift up

"Hey! What are you doing?!" she asked.

And he picked her up...

"Oh my god. Mike! Put me down!" she said, giggling.

And moved her out of the way.

He couldn't help but smile with how completely smitten she was at his touch and how adorable and tiny she was compared to him.

Then, after grabbing his comb, he turned to the mirror and started running the teeth of it through his hair and bangs. And El nudged his hip with hers, saying, "Hey, scoot over," just as she began to floss her teeth.

It was insanely cute, the way they groomed themselves in the mirror at the same time, so cute that she even let out a little laugh, muffled by the string she threaded between her teeth. And he smiled to himself.

After they both finished, they stopped for a second and just stared into the glass. Standing side-by-side, looking at themselves in the mirror and then at each other was...a powerful image. It made them reflect, so to speak, on how they not only *looked* good together, but *were* good together.

"Hey, um- I'm gonna get changed. I'll see you in a few."

"Okay," she said, softly and sweetly.

He walked past her and into his bedroom, shutting the door behind him, just as she shut the bathroom door behind herself. And they leaned their backs behind each closed door, with Mike sighing and El closing her eyes and smiling, as she often did.

They took that second, just a second, to realize their true feelings for each other. Even if they weren't going to act on them just yet, they could still have their fun, being all touchy, teasing...flirty.

She looked in the mirror and fixed her hair and he put on his pajamas. Then, he took a deep breath, exhaling through his mouth and opened the door, where he found El- standing against the opposite wall, waiting for him.

"Hey," she said, in an eager, high-pitched voice.

"Hey," he said, in a deeper, more casual tone, as he swung his hands together in claps. "You ready?"

"Yep. All set," she said with a smile.

"Great."

And he opened the basement door for her, saying:

"After you."

"Thanks."

"Yep."

walks down the steps

"You-You still have the fort...Oh my gosh!"

"Uh, *yeah!* *laughs* Where'd you think you were gonna be sleeping? *tilts head to look at her reaction*"

"I don't know...the couch, a sleeping bag! I just figured Max had a hunch about it when she brought it up earlier like that. I didn't really think she was being serious."

"Oh. No...I could never bring myself to take it down. *pauses* It meant too much to me."

"*It did or I did?*"

brief silence

"Both."

El smiles at the ground and blushes

"C'mon," he said, taking her hand and leading her to it.

And then he tucked her in, continuing to hold onto it as he said:

"Look, I know tonight's been absolute hell, but things are going to get better. Slowly, but they will."

"I know they will," she said, nodding.

"Good," he said, bobbing his head with a slight smile.

"Well, uh- Night, El."

"Night, Mike," she said, softly.

Mike chuckles

"What?"

"Nothing, just...Déjà vu."

"Déjà what?"

"Déjà vu, it's like when you feel that whatever's happening to you now has happened to you before, usually because of a familiar situation or exchange of conversation, which in this case is exactly it."

"Oh, I see. Like the night we met," she smiled.

"Yeah, just like that."

Then he said:

"You look comfy!"

"*giggles* That's because I am!"

laughs

"Are you sure you're gonna be okay?" he asked, rubbing her hand with his thumb.

"I'm sure I can manage," she said with a cute little smile.

Their faces were scarily close and El bit her lip just looking at him. He was *this* close to kissing her goodnight, but he stopped himself, knowing it wasn't right even though it felt that way. So, instead, he just kissed her cheek and said a simple:

"Sweet dreams."

"You too..."

And then he walked off and up to his room and that was that. Or so they thought...

You see, when El was around Mike, all of her troubles just seemed to sort of fade away, but when she was alone, they reappeared- and in the worst ways too...She had the hardest time sleeping that night, as all of those terrible thoughts came creeping back into her head, those terribly devastating thoughts of having lost someone she loved dearly- her father.

She cried herself to sleep, but it wasn't long until she popped up again from having a nightmare. At this point, she just didn't know what to do with herself anymore. So, she walked upstairs and gently woke up Mike, as he was the only one left to comfort her in times like these.

"Mike..." she said,

"*groggily* El? *rubs eyes* What uh- What are you still doing up?"

"I-I couldn't sleep," she said, crawling on his bed. "Is it okay if I just lay here with you for a while?"

"El, I-I don't know about this...I really don't think this is such a great idea."

"You're the one who suggested the sleepover!"

"Yeah, but first of all, we're broken up and second of all, it's just-
sighs if my mom found out you were in here right now, at this
hour, she'd kill me!"

"Who says she has to know? It can be our little secret..." she said
coily.

"El..."

"Mike!"

He waited to see what she would say next.

"I need you..."

clarifying silence

"Okay. *pauses* Okay, yeah, hop in."

"Thanks."

For a second, he was almost certain this was all just a dream of his,
as he often dreamt of El, but when she hopped under the covers with
him, he soon found that it was all very real and- there was a *girl* in
his bed.

"Hey, uh- Sorry for being so anal earlier, I just-"

"Anal?" she asked, giggling a little.

"Yeah, but it's not what you think. It has a different meaning. It
means-"

"Shh, shh, shh..." she said putting a finger to his lips. "You always
talk too much."

"Yeah, I know. *laughs* Sorry."

"And apologize when you don't need to."

"Yeah, I know. Sorry- I MEAN!"

laughs

"So, you said you couldn't sleep...Is it because-?"

"Yeah...*pauses* Every time my head hit the pillow, I just couldn't stop thinking about him and how I had a feeling it was going to happen before it did, but I let him go anyway..."

"El, this *isn't* your fault! *pauses* It's not..."

"*sniffles* You mean that?"

"I mean it! I promise you, it isn't."

"Okay. Sorry, for waking you up, I just- I-I can't be alone right now."

"No, no, I totally get it!"

"How were *you* able to sleep anyway?" she asked him.

"I have no idea! *shakes head* I could've sworn I was gonna be up all night, but I guess I just- I had something pleasant to dream about..."

"Oh yeah?"

"Yeah," he said, making it perfectly clear that she was, in fact, the one he was dreaming about.

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I ask you about something?"

"Sure. What's on your mind?"

"Earlier, you-you kissed me."

"Well, on the cheek, but yeah, I did."

"Why?"

"*laughs* *Why?!'*"

"Yeah. Why?"

"Because I wanted to. It just- I don't know...It-It felt *pauses to shrug* *right*."

"But what does this mean? I mean, what are we? We're not together, are we just friends? What is this called?"

"I don't know, but we don't need to put a label on it right now. Let's just *pauses* *be*."

He loved her so much that he almost forgot that they were still technically broken up, but that didn't matter to him. Being there for her in her time of need was all he really cared about.

"Mike?"

"Yes?"

"One more thing..."

"Okay...?"

"Hold me...please."

And he drew her close, her chest facing his, but just as she wrapped her arms around him, she soon came to find that he was shirtless and being El, she wasn't afraid to point it out.

"No shirt," she said, her left hand slowly sliding down from his shoulder and coming to a halt at the top of his chest.

"Huh?"

"You have no shirt."

"Oh. Right!"

"But you did earlier. What happened to it?"

"Oh, I just- I-I don't usually wear one when I sleep."

"Oh."

"Yeah, it's kind of a guy thing. I don't know why...but if it would

make you feel more comfortable, then I can put it back on."

"No, no, that's okay," she said.

"*laughs quietly* Goodnight, El."

"Goodnight," she said, with a smile he couldn't see but could feel in his heart.

And they both fell asleep with a smile across each of their faces. Now, of course, that smile faded. El was extremely torn up about Hopper. It was hard not to be. He had been such a present light in El's life, but then again, so was Mike and at least that was something. Whenever she felt scared, she just held onto his arms and chest a little tighter and everything was alright, just like he said it would be. She woke up a little earlier than he, but was afraid to move, in fear of waking him but also of letting him go. So, she just laid there, thanking her stars for every freckle on his face and every finger on his hand.

"Oh, hey! You're up!" he said, looking down near his arm, where the side of her neck laid upon.

She looked up at him with a lovestruck look in her eyes and put a finger up to his lips, tracing them with her index finger, then letting the tip of her finger snake down his chest and rub it a little.

"How kind of you to notice! *laughs*" she joked. "*noses touch, softly says* Good morning."

And then he lifted his arm, which was bent behind his head, and put El's wrist to his lips, kissing her tattoo.

"What was that for?"

"To make the pain go away."

"Aww! Thanks."

"Of course."

"Did you sleep well?" she asked.

"Like a bunny."

"*giggles* Me too...Well, sorta."

"I'm just glad you got some at all, poor thing," he said, running his hands through her hair.

"Yeah, thanks to you..."

"Well, are you hungry? We could always make your favorite..."

"Eggos?"

"What else?!" he said eagerly.

El giggles

And they did just that, having breakfast with the rest of the family, but making sure to sneak down at different times. Then, El showered, dried her hair, and got dressed, but not without Mike demanding to be in the same room as her, of course, as he wanted to help her and make sure that she didn't slip in the shower because of her leg. And by that time, Joyce was all ready to pick her up.

"Ready, sweetheart?" she asked.

"I don't want to let go..." she whispered to Mike, clinging onto him.

"Believe me, I don't either, but I'm afraid we don't really have a choice..." he said.

"*sighs, lets go* Yeah, I'm ready," she said, finally answering Joyce.

"Goodbye, Mike. I uh- I'll see you."

"Yeah...See ya."

On the car ride back home, Joyce and El briefly conversed about the sleepover and then jumped into a long conversation about what things would like from there on out, such as where El would live, who her guardian would be, and what her schooling arrangements would look like.

"El, *pauses* I know you're going through an unimaginable amount of pain and confusion right now and I want you to know that we're all here for you and you're not alone in this, but at some point, we will probably need to discuss your home and schooling situation."

"I understand. We can talk about it now if you'd like. I think I'm ready."

"Okay. Well, I've been thinking about this a lot while you were gone and I so wish that I could just let you pick your own guardian, but considering your powers and secrets, it really only makes sense for me to take you in. That might not be your ideal choice, but I can assure you that I will stop at nothing to keep you safe."

"There's no need to be sorry. I understand and besides, I would've picked you anyway. Hopper would've wanted it that way...Are you sure you're okay with this though? Taking me in and all?"

"Of course, sweetheart! The boys and I, we have no problem with making a new addition to the family and would be more than happy to take you in."

"*smiles* Thank you...for everything."

"Well, don't thank me yet...I'm afraid I have a bit of an upsetting proposal for you."

"What is it?"

"El, *holds hands* I know how much this place means to you, but I also know that this hasn't been an easy journey for you, not in the slightest and now your life just got a bit more complicated."

"Yes," she said, nodding.

"Can I tell you something you're not going to want to hear?"

"*nods*

"*sighs* I think if we stayed here, we might not make it. I know you want to protect your friends and I know that you love them dearly, but just because you can do those things doesn't mean you should,

especially if it's putting your own self at risk. You have already saved them over and over, but there's only so much you can do to protect them."

"What are you saying?"

"I think we need to move."

"Move? Where?"

"*tearfully* Out of Hawkins."

"Wh-Wha- *pauses* What would we do that for?"

"I think you know why..."

"But why do you want to?"

"This place, it's different. It's special in a lot of ways, but it's broken too. The people on the outside, they just shrug it off, think it'll get better, but all of us, you, me, Will, Jonathan, Max, the boys, everyone involved- we've been in on the inside. We know it wasn't just a fluke. It's all one big hot mess that we always seem to tangle ourselves in and it's not going to get any better. Even if nothing major happened again, it won't heal the damage that's already been done..Sure, we found Will, but he's never been quite the same since. And the body count goes up more and more every year...I've lost three people while here in Hawkins. I lost Bob, I lost Hopper, and then I lost myself...I'm not about to lose you or Will or Jonathan too."

tears up, holds Joyce's hand

"If we're already going to start new, we might as well start fresh. So, I'm proposing that we move, not right now, but within the next couple of months. When we're ready. Look, I know that this is a big transition and a lot to consider, but I need for you and Will and Jonathan to be safe and I truly think that this is the only thing that makes sense to do if we're really going to be intent about it. I know it's not ideal, but I really think that it would do us all some good...to get the hell out of this place, for good."

"For good? What good would that do? We'd just be leaving everyone

behind."

"We won't be leaving them behind. We'll come and visit regularly."

"You promise?"

"I swear it!"

"*sniffles* You've been thinking about this for a while now, haven't you?"

"*chuckles a little* I have."

"*also chuckles a little* I can tell," she said, sniffing.

snickers, brief pause

"How long?" she asked.

"How long what, sweetheart?" asked Joyce, rubbing her back.

"How long have you been thinking about this?"

"A little less than a year, but believe it or not, your father wouldn't let me leave! He insisted that I stay. He kept telling me that there were people here who still cared about me and implied that he was one of them, but now that he's gone, I just don't have much of a reason left to stay."

"I know my dad and he wouldn't say that to just anyone...You meant a lot to him, you know that?"

"*lip quivers, nods* He meant a lot to me too...And I probably shouldn't be telling you this, but screw it! *sighs* We had plans... plans to go on a date, but that was before..."

"*wipes tears* Really?" she asked, suddenly interested.

"Yep," she said, nodding.

"My dad...on a date? Wow! I mean, wow..."

"Kind of hard to picture, huh?"

"Yeah...I mean, I always thought you guys would make a good pair...I always had this fantasy that maybe someday you'd become my mom but while he was still my dad, of course. At least my glass is half full now," she said with a smile.

"Aww, c'mere, you!" she said, pulling her in for a hug.

pulls away

"Listen, you take as long as you need to process all of this. There's no rush!"

"Thanks."

"Of course, sweetheart," she said, placing a section of hair behind her ear.

[El's POV]

The next three months flashed right before my eyes and the next thing I knew, it was moving day already. I was nearly completely finished with packing up my things, the only thing left being my favorite teddy bear, Beary, which I'm sure you can guess who named it.

[3rd Person POV]

It was on the very top of the shelf in her closet and she tried to reach for it herself, but it was too high up and she was too short. Frustrated, she sighed heavily, placing her hands on her hips as she stared at it, the veins in her forehead a bulging blue. She looked down with disappointment.

[El's POV]

No one else was around to help me and though it was a little task, I was determined to do it on my own. But then a thought occurred to me, a way to satisfy not only my need but my curiosity too- I could try and move it down with my powers. My powers were the one part of me that was special, the one part of me that stood out. Without them, I not only felt lost but like I had lost my purpose too. Mike tried his best to show me that my background was what made me

different, not just my powers. Joyce even expressed that not everybody had just one purpose or even a purpose at all, but assured me that if I did, I would find it. She said that that's what your teens are for, figuring out who you are, what you're passionate about, and your place in the world. And when I came to Max about this, she said that I might just surprise myself by how much I'm actually capable of on my own and that true power came from within, I just have to trust in myself. But this time, I didn't feel misled by her advice. I felt the opposite. I felt encouraged, by not only hers but everyone's, yet I still couldn't fight this dying urge of mine to put them to the test...

After having lost them, I had tried to test them out time and time again with no success or positive results, but it only made me feel less and less capable, so everyone advised me to take a break for a while (mostly Mike but Joyce a little too). In some ways, I agreed with them and deep down I knew they were right, but they just didn't know what it was like. So, looking up again with the same focus and crinkle between my eyebrows, I did what I vowed I wouldn't. Raising my hand in front of me at eye level, I attempted to harness the power that once lived inside of me.

[3rd Person POV]

Her hand twitched and writhed with struggle, her face scrunching up like a raisin. She was really hoping that they would work in her favor this time, her powers, but for trying to lift something so light, they sure weighed down on her brain until it was too much to bear and there was no point left in trying.

She let go, again, her chest rising and sinking as breaths pushed against her diaphragm in a series of sighs...That was until she was suddenly interrupted by a familiar, comforting voice. "They'll come back," he said. "I know they will." She smiled and watched as the boy who welcomed her into his world came walking through the door, approaching her. Now that he was taller than his own sister and mother, reaching for that teddy bear was a piece of cake and he did just that. She wondered how he knew that she was trying to reach it in the first place. She figured he had probably seen her fail, but it didn't matter. She was just glad that he was here.

He handed her Beary. She looked down as she wrapped each arm

around it, then up at him as she let out a soft "Thanks!" with a shy smile and settled in place with an eager bounce.

"You packed your walkie, right?" he asked.

"Yes," I asserted.

"Because you know that I'm going to steal Cerebro from Dustin and call you so much you're going to have to turn it off, right?"

[El's POV]

I snickered...He did too.

I looked down and he looked right at me with a smile.

I then brought up Thanksgiving, making sure that our plans were still settled for him to come over. I feel like just the fact that he was sacrificing his holiday plans just to spend them with us really said something about the way that he felt about me, even if he couldn't yet say that for himself. I mean, sure, Will's his best friend, but though no one's willing to admit it, we all know he's coming more for my sake than his.

He even went on about Christmas, suggesting that maybe I could come spend it with him, and Will too! And he started rambling on, as the lovable Mike Wheeler does, about how fun it would be with all of our cool, new presents to play with, which he started to regret saying solely because of how childish it sounded to him, but I didn't mind. I didn't mind at all. I loved that idea because I loved him. And I reassured him, trying to break through the mere awkwardness of it all by telling him that I liked presents too and that was that.

Then, I looked down, my face changing as I passed him. There was so much history and unfinished business between us and I no longer knew where we stood. I thought that talking to him before I moved away would clear things up, but I left the conversation feeling more confused than I was when we first started. It only further blurred the line between our being friends or more than friends.

I could tell he felt like he had totally blew it, like he had wasted his only chance to tell me how he really felt while it was just the two of

us. I couldn't help but feel bad for him. He let his awkwardness get the best of him again, just like when he first tried to tell me before back at the grocery store, but since the conversation wasn't going in that direction, he was hesitant to bring it up. He was afraid of how I might react and of being vulnerable with me in that way, but I wasn't. I knew how I felt and even though I was much shier than he, I somehow found the courage to confront him about it. It was then that I finally learned what Max meant when she said that true power came from within.

"Mike," I said, turning around to face him.

"Yeah," he answered, his hand hitting his side as he turned to face me.

I then brought up that day back at the cabin when he was arguing with Max. He claimed he didn't follow even though I knew he did, but I continued to paint the picture for him regardless.

He acted like it was so long ago, like he had forgotten about it completely, but I could see right through him. He had been thinking about it for far longer than he was willing to admit. He claimed that the conversation was just an argument and heat of the moment stuff, but I knew it was more than that. I knew that it had opened a floodgate of feelings he didn't know he had in him, but loving someone wasn't just something you forgot, despite his "not remembering" exactly what he had said.

So, saying his name again, I approached him slowly, the teddy bear still in my arms. He looked down at me with a slightly confused, furrowed look between his eyebrows. But reaching a hand up to the side of his neck, I looked him straight in the eyes, and mustered enough confidence to tell him that I loved him too. Then, with my thumb sliding into his hair, I guided his face towards mine and pulled him in for one kiss that turned into three. And afterwards, I stared into his eyes again and smiled, my hand sliding down his chest.

This time I walked away with a nervous look on my face, a look of "Oh my god, I can't believe I just did that." I closed my eyes again and scrunched my face, this time, pleased with how I left things. And I can only imagine my forwardness must've taken a real shock to him

because even though he kissed me back, I could still sense that his eyes were open.

At the time, I didn't know how he felt or how my telling him that and kissing him *made* him feel, but all I know is that Mike and I have always been on the same page in our relationship when you don't count the brief period where we were broken up. We've always felt the same way about each other, even when we didn't know how to express it to one another or got too nervous when we tried to, so it wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that the same still applied now.

Before Hop passed, things were so unclear between me and Mike. It was always the question of whether we were friends or if there was still something there between us. When he saved me from Billy, he showed me how much he still cared and the danger he would put himself in at my cost, but it wasn't until he gave me those M&Ms back at the hospital that he truly won me back with his charm. Those two moments reassured me that he was still going to be an integral part of my life, regardless of our label, but also convinced me that we were worth fighting for and that this wasn't just something that was going to happen over night. We needed time to mend and to heal our broken hearts and find our way back to each other in the process. With the way things were going though, I was sure we'd be getting back together in no time, but I came to find that that was not the case and it took a lot longer than I thought it would.

Overhearing him say that he loved me was the biggest, most flattering compliment I've ever received, one that I didn't quite know what to do with and I can't help but wonder if that's just because I'm still learning. I knew what love was, I just didn't know *how* you knew when it was.

Regardless, I started to reexamine my own feelings for him, but I guess I was just waiting for the moment when he would actually say it to my face, thinking that maybe I would know how I felt right then and there, but this was his thing to tell me and I wasn't planning on beating him to the punch. Eventually though, not long after he got all flustered at the grocery store, I realized that I loved him too. I loved Mike Wheeler and I didn't know what to do about it.

I think it was that night, the night when Hopper died that I really

came to my senses. Something happened between us then. He was the only person in the world that knew how to comfort me, how to take my mind off of things even in the worst of times. He was my rock. And there was something about the way he held me that night that just felt so...*right*. I can't explain why and maybe I never will be able to, but all I know is that there was just no one else in the world that I wanted to be with more than him. As far as I was concerned, he was the only person for me, no one else. He was my person and I was his.

When I knew for sure that I did, I had the hardest time keeping it to myself. Loving him didn't feel like it was meant to be a secret. It felt like something I needed to shout from the rooftops and I wanted nothing more than to tell everyone I knew, but him most of all.

He stole my heart like a box of Eggos from the grocery store. I just couldn't stop thinking about him no matter how hard I tried to, but the thing was that he kept giving me mixed signals. There was something about the way he would hold me so close and tight, like he couldn't lose me again, that was so affectionate. He took care of me so well when I was wounded, but we never kissed and he hardly ever held my hand on purpose, so if we weren't together, then what were we? I knew he wanted to be in a relationship with me, but why couldn't he just tell me that? That's what I had the hardest time understanding. But Mike was patient. He didn't expect anything from me. In fact, I've come to realize that the very reason he didn't come right out and say it in the first place after everything that happened with Starcourt was simply because of what happened to Hopper.

He loved me in silence. He was just waiting for the right moment to tell me how he felt, but there never seemed to be one. I was completely devastated when Hop died and he wanted to give me space and enough time to grieve and adjust to life with the Byers before bringing it up again. He just wanted to be there for me above all else, so he kept putting it off. He didn't want to add to the problem or get in the way, but what he didn't realize was that this was what I needed to hear from him all along. It was something that could lift me out of the darkness, but he figured I already had more than enough to worry about and it didn't even occur to him that I might love him too!

From the moment I told him that I was moving away, I could tell that it was killing him on the inside even though he wouldn't say so to my face. I'll never forget telling him that...the look on his face. He cried, I cried, we hugged, and leaned our foreheads against each other like we didn't know how to break past that barrier.

So that was why. That was why I told him just before I left because I couldn't hold it in one second longer. He had probably tried to move on during those three months because that's probably what he thought I was doing, but I had quite the opposite on my agenda. You see, I wasn't ready to move on or give up. I needed him more now than ever and I wasn't about to settle for a friendship when I knew I could have so much more. Most things in my life I didn't have control over- Being with Mike was the one thing that I did. And telling him felt good, it felt better than I thought it would. It was such a relief knowing that he knew and such a wonderful feeling to finally get it off of my chest, that big elephant that was in the room all this time...

Though we never said the words "Let's get back together," it was implied. We both loved each other, so it only made sense for us to be together, despite everything else trying to tear us apart. I could just tell by the embrace Mike held me in when we said our goodbyes. We said goodbye about 3 or 4 times, like one goodbye would never be enough and it wasn't, because we always came back to each other, no matter what. Always.

I said goodbye to every one of my friends. I cried my eyes out, with each hug hurting a little more than the last, but none compared to Mike's. That was a pain like no other I had encountered, and I have known pain worse than most...

"I'm sorry for telling you so late, I know have the worst timing, but- I just couldn't leave without telling you how I felt. That wouldn't have been fair to you," I said.

"El, even if you never told me you loved me, it wouldn't stop me from loving you. I would still love you just the same, but I'm glad to know that you do too..."

"Yeah, I do. I really, really do...*sniffles* That's what makes all of this so hard! *laughs* You were always so scared of losing me...Who

would've thought that I'd be the one losing you?"

"You haven't lost me, El. I'm right here and when I'm not, I'm right here..." he said, guiding her hand to her heart with his own.

eyes sparkle with wonder, lip quivers into a smile

I sobbed in that van until there wasn't even an ounce of water left in my body to shed another tear. It felt like my heart had been torn into a million pieces. I felt completely hopeless. I was eager to start a new life, but not like this. Not when I had just found my family. We were always in the wrong place at the wrong time and I couldn't stand it.

After having arrived in my new town, I kept trying to hold it together, to push through this period of adjustment, but whenever I got home, everything fell apart. I would just psych myself out thinking about how all of my friends were probably out having the time of their lives back home and I was stuck here, without a friend in the world. I felt trapped, like Rapunzel in her tower, except I didn't know how to let my hair down. What was the answer? I sure didn't have one...But there was always Will. He was my friend. We might've not been as close with each other as we were with other people in the party, but being surrounded by him and Joyce and Jonathan made me feel a little closer to home even though I was miles and miles away from it.

Keeping in touch was hard, but I was determined to do it, no matter what. I soon came to realize that it was a two-way street and that sometimes I too had to do the initiating, which wasn't something I was used to. It also proved challenging, particularly because it was harder than I thought it would be to always keep the conversation light, fun, and consistently interesting. Often times, it just fell dry...for a number of reasons. Sometimes it was because we caught ourselves telling a story we had already told before. Other times, it was just that we had run out of things to talk about altogether and often because of that particularly dull day. Sometimes, things were so bad on my end that I was almost tempted not to recount all of my problems to my friends and instead to withhold them. I tried to keep them bottled up inside the best that I could, but it only made things worse and I was really only lying to myself, acting like everything was fine when it wasn't. I just didn't want to bring them down when

god knows I already was...

Lucas and Dustin I didn't talk to quite as much. Will spent more time on the phone with them than I did, but I still managed to talk to them several times a week. As I'm sure you can imagine, I talked to Mike every day and Max pretty much just the same. Max and I spent long hours on the phone for the first few weeks, connecting even more than usual over our shared grief. And Mike, well, Mike and I talked to each other once or twice a day, and that's not even counting when he would call me at the start and end of every day just to wish me good morning and goodnight! Every conversation with Mike might as well have been a phone date in itself and I always thought it was so cute how he would give me daily news reports on the latest Hawkins gossip, from none other than Mrs. Wheeler herself!

Living in Hawkins was constant chaos, but it was my chaos. My new town wasn't anything like it. Not even close. I hated it and everyone there. I wished that I wasn't this close-minded about it, but how could I not be?! It felt like I would never have friends again like I did back home, and even if I did, I would be too afraid that they would hurt my current relationships, which were my only real priority. I just didn't know how much longer I could last in this environment...It was much bigger than Hawkins. It made me feel so small, like I was 2 inches tall or something.

And as I said before, all of these feelings were somehow echoed in this roof over my head, rather than the strange, unfamiliar streets I walked among each day. I hid it well, but on the inside, I was a hot mess, a complete emotional wreck.

Every day, I would get home and have a complete mental breakdown. It was something about living in a house that didn't feel like a home that made me feel the most alienated and isolated. It only reminded me of what I had left behind. Though my body, my being, my physical presence was here, my heart, my mind, my soul was there, in Hawkins, with the people I loved most. It made me feel like a robot, like I was just this shell of a person controlled by a brain. Was my whole life just one big illusion or was I actually this living, breathing person with a soul? I pondered over this question most days. It usually came to me at night, this panic that woke me up at the crack of dawn, making me wonder where I was and what I was

doing there, but I was usually able to talk myself out of these odd feelings and realize that- it was all just my anxiety talking.

[3rd Person POV]

El still saw Will as a friend or maybe even still just as Mike's friend. They weren't that close, despite how much they had in common, but they were both reserved and almost shared Mike at different times. After beginning to live with him, however, he started to feel like a roommate to her, especially since they shared a wall between their rooms. And then they started interacting more and more and warmed up to each other. They would gather at each meal and sometimes even hang out. And eventually, as she started to pick up on his habits and quirks, as their bond continued to grow, she started to see him as a brother and maybe even *her* brother. And as for Jonathan, well, the same was true for him even though he wasn't around as much with college and all, but when he was, she enjoyed his company. Ever since he helped relieve her wound, she had a deep respect for him and besides, he was Nancy's boyfriend, which all connected back to Mike, so how could she not like him!

Living with Joyce was the easiest part of the transition. They already had a clear connection from the get-go, one that could be traced all the way back to when Will first went missing. It was then that Joyce learned of El's story on accident and without even knowing her yet, as she thought that Will was somehow mixed up in all of this business with the lab. And when she heard it, she felt so moved and was so caught up in the tragedy of it all that she did everything she could to make El feel welcome and like she belonged. So, clearly, it was no surprise that they had an instant connection, as El was like the daughter she had never had and Joyce was already the closest thing to a mother figure that El had in her life; and now that role she played was starting to take actual form...

No one could replace Hopper, overprotective and loving as he was, but Joyce was the next best thing. Like Hopper, she was tough as nails and had motherly instincts that made her want to be more attentive to the needs and whereabouts of her children, especially after everything that happened with Will. Joyce was a smart cookie and had grit that extended far beyond her tiny little self. She didn't give up easily and never without a fight. She didn't care what other

people thought of her, she just always marched to the beat of her own drum. She was a little squirrely at times, but fiery and independent at the same time. And she was nurturing in ways that El had never been treated, but it was so comforting and just what she needed. She was understanding and empathetic. And best of all- she was the closest thing that Hop had to a friend, unless you counted his colleagues and Flo (or even Benny when he was still alive). Back in the good ol' days, he had plenty of pals, but as he got older, he became more cold and distant and lost a lot of friends because of that. Although everyone knew that Joyce was much more than a friend to him...Even for Alexei, who hardly knew a lick of English, their attraction and feelings for one another were blatantly obvious! And for that reason, El felt even closer to Joyce. She could've potentially been a special someone in his life, in *their* life, and in some ways, she already was. She especially appreciated her motherly presence in her life in moments like these:

"It seems to me that you're feeling a little homesick." she said, rubbing her back. "But that's totally normal! The boys are going through the same thing and so am I..."

"Homesick?"

"Yeah, like missing Hawkins, your friends- all of it."

"Oh, well, if that's what being homesick means, then that's what I'm feeling..."

And Joyce stroked her hair, looking at her with concern, giving her such words of comfort. But that reassurance didn't last, as living in this new town though was anything but easy...El felt powerless when she wasn't surrounded by the people that loved her and even more so without her actual powers. But this was a defining moment for her...This was when El would think back to what Max had told her that past summer, disregarding the flawed boy advice she gave her, but focusing on what made her feel like herself, what she liked, and on her independence and where that came from. The moment she left that lab, that was when she slowly started to learn how to live a life that was no longer under someone else's control, but was finally- her own. She was constantly having to do things on her own ever since. It was all she *could* do! She had to fend for herself, but she also learned

how to ask for help without fear of being forced into a situation she didn't want to be put in. Though she was still learning about her own inner strength and the confidence and empowerment that stowed inside her, just waiting for the chance to come out, a part of her knew that being isolated once again was good for her in the sense that she could figure out where all of that stemmed from and what that meant to her. At the same time, however, she couldn't decide which was better: having been isolated in that lab for all of her childhood without a friend in the world or how she felt now- being torn away from her friends and family by the means of death and moving away. It seemed that now, there was only before and after with no in-between, nor balance by any means. She didn't regret meeting all of the people that she had, not in the least, but in doing so, she unintentionally created that feeling of missing them and restored that streak of loneliness that she had grown so accustomed to. She certainly hadn't missed *that*...That was for sure.

Hopper. His loss alone made her feel at a loss herself. The first year of living with him was unbearable at times. She soon found that she was tied down by so many rules and he didn't know how to handle her. They constantly argued. It wasn't healthy and he was gone more often than not. She felt a prisoner in her own home, BUT she also wouldn't have changed a thing, as he was her father now and she cared about him dearly. But it wasn't until she left Chicago that she had finally decided that Hawkins was her true home afterall and over time, she grew to love Hopper as a father and learned how to put up with his ways, but now, without him, without Hawkins, she felt a *stranger* to her own home.

She fell into a depression, with anxiety to coincide. Maybe it was always there, with all that she had been through and the PTSD that she struggled with daily, but now it was just echoed in her homesickness. Sometimes she could feel so detached from the world and everything in it, but she was determined to make the most of what she had. She wouldn't be El Byers if she wasn't. Yes, that's right, El Byers. But now that she was in fact not only a Hopper, but a Byers too, Joyce treated her just as she would any of her other children, tending to her needs as needed:

El nervously paces and bites her nails

"El, honey." Joyce called from the kitchen.

"El? You okay?" she asked, walking up to her.

"It's 3:15. I always see Mike at 3:15."

"He came over *every* day at 3:15?"

nods

"How the hell did he manage to do tha- Never mind...not important."

"Well, is there anything I can do?" she continued.

"I don't think so..." she said.

But the more El got in her head about it, the more she started spiraling. Thinking about Mike led to thinking about Hawkins which all led back to Hopper and sometimes even as far as the lab. She had more shit to deal with than her pretty little head could take and then something happened...something terrible.

[El's POV]

There was this feeling in the back of my mind like a faucet dripping or a pencil tapping on a desk. I could hear it, I could feel it, it was constant, and irritating. It started out small, but then I couldn't turn it off and it only festered from that moment forward, becoming more and more prominent. It felt like something needed to happen, but it wasn't happening. My entire body was feeling everything and nothing at once. I just wanted to jump out of my skin, to get away from this feeling, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't.

I had a meltdown. My mind was racing faster than I could run away from it and I was freaking out. I tried to slow myself down, to *calm* myself down, but it almost felt like I had lost control of my own body, like I was a prisoner again.

My blood pressure spiked, my heart pounding. I could feel the pressure of my pulse beneath my temples without even rubbing my finger over the surface. My hands were clammy and shaking and I felt this tingling sensation throughout my entire body. I grew fearful,

fearful of what was happening to me and fearful of what might happen next. *Would this be the end?* I wondered. An the more worried and distressed I grew, the more I fell short of breath, my lungs practically gasping for air.

I began reciting "It's alright" to myself like it was the only phrase I knew. I only whispered it, but the more this inexplicable feeling grew, the louder I blurted it out. And before I knew it, I was on the ground, groaning, my knees to my chest and my hands on the sides of my head, completely red in the face. Joyce saw most of it in action, but once I reported all of my symptoms to her, she put two and two together.

"El, honey, what's going on?"

"El?" she repeated. "Are you alright?"

"No, no, I *gulps* don't feel so good."

"How *do* you feel?"

"Dizzy."

"Do you feel like you're going to pass out?"

nods

"In that case, the best thing for you to do is just go ahead and lie down so you don't fall if it happens."

"Okay," I said, and did as she said.

"Would water help?"

"Yes, please."

"Here you go," she said, walking back and handing it to her.

She engulfed it in vigorous gulps and noisily set the empty glass down on the table as she herself sat down.

"El, I think what you're having is an anxiety attack. I know because I

used to get them too."

"That-That doesn't sound good..."

"No, it's-it's not, but it's pretty common for someone who's been through something similar to what you have."

"How-How do I stop it? How do I make it stop?" she asked helplessly.

"There's no *one* way really, but there are certain things you can do to help slow it down."

"Like what?"

"Well, for starters, you can slow down your breathing. Here, I'll show you what I mean. We can do it together."

"Okay," she said.

And she did just as Joyce said and showed her, which seemed to help a little.

"I-I think it's working," she said, surprised at how something so simple could fix something so intense.

"G-G-G-Good. I'm so glad, sweetheart."

"J-Joyce? *pauses* Will this happen to me again?" she asked, with a tear strolling down her cheek.

"I'm afraid the answer is probably so, my dear, but don't worry, sweetheart! They *are* manageable."

"Then how come they don't feel that way?"

"*sighs* I don't know, that's just the way they are I guess, but honey, we're not gonna let it do the damage. There are things you can do to relieve and lessen them. You can always take the pacing outside and walk it off, or concentrate that adrenaline rush and nervous energy into exercise. That might be good for you, especially to build your strength while you don't have your powers at the moment. It might give you something to feel proud of, even! And if that didn't work,

then there's always listening to songs or watching tv to calm you down, but right now, what I think might be the most beneficial to you is calling someone who puts you at ease like Max...or maybe even the boy who you were so eager to see all along. I don't know, just a suggestion, take it or leave it..." Joyce said innocently, though secretly priding herself in knowing what El really wanted.

"Oh, I'll take," she said, grabbing the phone from her hand.

Joyce giggles

dials phone, it rings

"Hello?" he asked.

"Hey, Mike, it's me...El."

"*laughs* I know it's you, silly!"

"Okay, well, you never know! I could be lots of people!"

"True! Who am I to say! You could easily be one of the guys just playing a prank on me."

"Well, lucky for you, I'm not."

"Well, I'm glad because I'd much rather talk to you."

"Aww...That's sweet."

"Well, I'm a sweet guy!"

"The sweetest!" she said.

Mike smiles

"So, how have you been? What's my gorgeous girl up to these days?"

"That's actually um- *gulps* that's what I wanted to call you about..."

"Oh?" he said, interested, like a question. "What-What's going on? Are you alright?"

"Well, no. No, not really. I uh *brief pause* kind of just had an anxiety attack."

"Oh my god- El! Are you okay?! What-What can I do?"

"Nothing really, just talking to you is more than enough."

"Aww, well, gosh...H-How did it happen?"

"I was just thinking about how we normally always met at 3:15 and how we never did anymore and it made me really sad and anxious and my mind, my-my thoughts, they just wouldn't stop and I-I don't know...I just- lost it, I guess."

"What did it feel like?"

"It was almost like I floated up out of my body and was watching myself, suffering..."

"Suffering?"

"In a way, yeah. You know when you're in a dream and you're screaming, but you can't make any noise?"

"Yeah...?"

"It's kind of like that."

"Oh, gosh, El, I-I'm so sorry! I hate that you had to go through that...I just wish I could be with y-"

"Don't. *pauses* Don't be sorry and I know you do...'cause I do too."

"Mike?" she asked.

"Mike, don't cry! Please, don't cry..."

"*sniffles* I'm sorry, I just- I hate this. I hate not getting to talk to you face-to-face or hold you, kiss you...touch you- But you know what? *sniffles, wipes tears* I'm going to start calling you every day at 3:15 and you won't ever feel alone again from now on because-"

"To hear your voice is to know that you're with me," she said.

"*breaks into big ol' smile* Yeah, that's uh- that's why."

El snuffles, wipes tears

"Oh no, you're not crying now *too*, are you?" he asked.

"*giggles* Maybe just a little..."

"Are you hugging the phone right now?" he asked.

"No...Are you?"

"What? No! Of course not..." he said, removing the phone from his embrace.

"Well, that was convincing!" she joked.

"Shut up," he said.

"Never!"

"Good! Because I would miss hearing your voice too much."

"Awwww!" she said, the adoration escalating in her voice as she lingered onto the end of the word.

It went on like that for about a half an hour until it met its end and afterwards, Joyce returned to the couch to have a discussion with El.

"Joyce."

"Yes, sweetie."

"I don't want to feel that way ever again, the way I felt when I had the-"

"Episode, I know."

"Episode? Is that what you call it?"

"It's another name for it."

"It could be *our* name for it."

"Yeah! Sure. *smiles, smile fades* You know, El, I'm not sure how you'd feel about this, but I'd like to talk to you about possibly seeing a shrink."

"A shrink?"

"Yeah, like someone to talk to, a professional, a therapist."

"What-What would we talk about?"

"Whatever you wanted really. It's up to you, but usually people go to talk about their problems."

"You-You think I have a problem?"

"No, that's not what I'm saying at all," she said, grabbing her hands to hold. "I'm just saying that it might be a good idea because you have a lot on your plate right now and *tilts head towards, raises eyebrows* many people find it helpful to get these kind of things off their chest. There's nothing wrong with therapy, with asking for help. It's a good thing. It's healthy for you."

"Do *you* think that's what I should do?"

"I think it would be wise, but it's totally your decision. 100%."

"How much would I tell the therapist?"

"As little or as much as you want to, sweetheart!"

"But how much am I allowed to tell them? Like I can't tell them about my pow-"

"No, no. Not that. You leave that part for me. *pats thigh* But you could tell them anything that's not lab-related. You could tell them about your trauma, leaving out your particular part in it, but rather talking about what it was, what it feels like, and how it's been affecting you. You could talk about Mike and what it's like to miss him, all of that homesickness and *pauses* you could even talk about your grief...Therapists, you see, they know how to help you work through this stuff, El. They're trained specifically to work with anxiety or trauma depending on which field they're trained in."

"Really?"

"Yeah."

"So, what do you say?"

"I'll think about it."

"Sounds like a plan. Thanks for having this talk with me! Feel free to go and do whatever you want now."

"I think I'm okay with staying right here for now, that is if you're not busy..."

"*smiles* No, I'm not busy! Which would you rather do? Watch a movie or play a board game?"

"Mm...Movie because a board game would be more fun if we played it with the boys and they don't always like the movies that we pick."

"Agreed. What sounds good to you? Girls Just Want To Have Fun perhaps?"

"Sounds perfect!" she said.

And the next thing she knew, it was already November, November 6th that is. The day that Will went missing...

It wasn't easy, it never was on this day. His PTSD was always triggering him even more than usual around this time, but his family was there for him.

"Would it make you feel better if you could spend time with your friends today, sweetie?" Joyce asked Will, rubbing his back.

"You mean drive all the way to Hawkins a day earlier? No, no...I mean, I'd love to see them, but I just think it would all be a little bit too much, particularly today."

"Understood. Just wondered if it would cheer you up."

"Yeah, well, I think that's pretty inevitable."

"Well, I love you, does that help?"

"A little."

"Then I've done my job," she said with a smile.

smiles

"I mean it though, Will. You've always been such a good sport, ever since you were a baby. Our family, we've been through a lot...*more* than a lot, but you've always had a positive attitude about it. I know that you've struggled in years past with bullies, but a part of me is so thankful that we moved here where that and all of the other stuff are no longer an issue for us."

"Yeah, except, now I'm the new kid, like Max."

"But that will wear off."

"Yeah, I know, you're right..." he said.

"Ah, *pulls in for hug* I just love you so much and don't you ever forget that!"

"I can't! You won't let me!" he said, laughing a little.

"That's right!" she said. "*kisses head* Mmm-WAH!"

Will blushes with embarrassment

Now, you may have caught Will mentioning driving to Hawkins a day earlier and wondered to yourself, *What did he mean by that?* Well, I'll tell you. What he meant was just this: The day after he went missing was the day when Mike found El and now that they were together and things were getting serious with their long-distance relationship, he wanted to make big plans with her, but since the Byers had already talked about them going on a road trip, El thought that she was completely busy that day and declined his invitation. Little did she know, however, that he, in fact, was her destination all along.

It was perfect! Everything was set in place, just as he had planned it—a surprise party with the party, starting from where it all began—Mirkwood. He even made sure to get Will in on it, who, keeping it all

to himself, would try to distract El and make sure that she didn't catch on without lying to her because while siblings might, friends don't lie and in this case- they were both. And so, he would keep El out of the kitchen at all costs the day before as Joyce attempted to make an Eggo cake. We all know she would go to extreme measures like that for her kids!

The plan was for the Byers to drive on over on the 7th and spend the night at a motel, as they often did when they came to visit. And Dustin and Lucas would ride with Mike to Mirkwood, where he and El had first met, with Will bringing her to them. Meanwhile, Max would sneak into Mike's house to help set everything up. Lucky for them, the forecast was rainy, just like it had been that exact night, so reuniting there with El was going to be even more magical than Mike had initially intended it to be.

And Will guided El right to the same spot, his hand over her eyes, removing it once in proximity of Mike.

"Will, where are you taking me?" she asked, laughing.

"*giggles* You'll see. *removes hand* Literally."

And Mike looked at her the same way that he always did- with heart eyes.

"Mike?" she called out. "Oh my god, Mike!" she cried, running out to him.

hugs, pulls away

"Dustin? Lucas? What are you guys doing here?" she asked, filled with disbelief.

"Surprise!" they all said, as Mike approached her with a big, giddy smile.

"Why? Is it some holiday no one bothered to tell me about or something?"

"*chuckles* Kind of. You know what it is, you just didn't know when it was."

Puzzled, she began to look around at her surroundings, which oddly filled her with nostalgia.

"Wait a minute...This isn't where we first met, is it?"

Mike slowly smiles

She covered her mouth in awe.

"So, that means that today's the day we-?"

Mike nods

She squealed, throwing her hands on him.

They kissed once, then some more, then even a little more, like they couldn't stop and they didn't want to.

Lucas clears throat

"You think we missed this too much?" Mike asked in a whisper.

"Eh, what is much!" she said, nuzzling his nose with her own.

"*Dustin snaps in face* Hey, we're still here, assholes!"

"*giggles* Sorry," said El.

"*to Mike* Did we surprise you?" asked Will.

"Will! Hey, man!" he said, pulling him in for a quick bro hug. "Yeah, you did actually."

"Oh, good!" he said.

"Glad to have you here with us this time, Byers," said Mike.

"Glad to be here," he said. "You may have not found me then, but at least *some* good came from it," he said with a brotherly smile.

"Yeah, as much shit as we give you two for being all in love all the time, we're really glad that we found you, El."

"Aww, thanks, guys," she said. "You have no idea what that means to me! I'm can't even tell you how glad I am that we met...especially you, mister!" she said, poking Mike's chest.

"*smiles* Happy Anniversary, El," said Mike, kissing her cheek.

"Happy Anniversary..." she said back, all googly-eyed.

Lucas makes gagging noise

Dustin laughs

Mike flips off

"*turns to Will* I've taught him well, haven't I?" Dustin joked.

all laugh

"Hey, speaking of that, where's Max?" asked El.

"You'll see..." said Mike.

"When? Where?"

"Now. C'mon! Let's go!"

And he threw his arm around El as they walked back up the hill and all rode away together by bike.

"You can share with me, Will," said Dustin.

"Thanks, man."

"No sweat," he said.

And off they went.

During the time that they had been gone, Joyce had headed over to the Wheelers' house as well, setting up the cake.

rings doorbell

"Surprise!" said Max, greeting them at the door.

"Max!" said El, lunging towards her in a hug.

"Hey, girl! I missed you," she said, hugging her back.

"*doesn't let go* I missed you too!"

finally lets go

"*nods* Max."

"*nods* Mike."

El lightly hits Mike in the gut

"Ah! *to Max* G-Good to have you here," he said.

"Yeah, thanks," she said.

"*sighs* Ah, home sweet home," El said with a smile as she walked in.

And they all gathered around the table, the eggo cake placed right in the center, with candles that said 3, 5, & 3 among the circle of eleven regular candles.

"*gasps* Rose petals, an eggo cake, 353, 11...You really did all of this for me?"

"Y-Yeah, why wouldn't I? I love you, you know that."

"Yeah, well, I love you back, but I'm pretty sure you already knew that too," she said, her face close to his, her arms around his neck.

quick kiss

"Thank you," she said.

"No need to thank *me*. I'm the one who should be thanking you, for-"

"Alright, lovebirds, it's not Thanksgiving!" said Dustin.

everyone laughs

Dustin curtsies

"*to El* Make a wish," said Mike.

"It already came true because I'm here with you..."

Mike blushes, pulls hair back and kisses neck, wraps arms around from behind

"Do it anyway. I'll do it with you."

"Okay," she said, smiling.

And they did just that, happy as could be.

"Now, I'm not the best cook or baker, but I tried my best. I sure hope it tastes good," Joyce nervously explained.

"Joyce, *with a giggle* I love it! It's perfect! *kisses cheek*"

"Thank you, sweetie."

And later, Mike went on to talk about how that night he had gone looking for someone dear to him that he lost and though it wasn't until later that he was found, he found El and in El he found the love of his life. But after that monologue of a sentiment, they all hung out in his basement, with El and himself in the fort, playing D&D with the rest of the gang, just like old times. Ah, home sweet home...

2. I'm In Love, Thanks To You

Hey, guys! I am super excited to announce that I am back with a new story! I am so thrilled with all of the feedback I have gotten from Mileven in Heaven and hope that this new story will meet your expectations. Keep in mind that this story is completely separate from the last one, but I might throw in a couple of old references to it every now and then if you look real closely. I have actually gotten to know quite a few of you through Instagram and it has truly touched me. I love being able to connect with you all through my stories and hope to continue to do so. Also, if you've never seen White Christmas, you should look up the musical numbers I referenced in this chapter on YouTube so you can better understand the story. It's a wonderful movie and my family actually watches it every Thanksgiving. Anyway, I love you all and I hope you enjoy! (P.S. I changed my Instagram username to youdontmessaroundwithmileven for those of you who want to give it a follow. If you do end up following it, please DM me and let me know that you're a fan of my stories because I would love to talk to you about them!)

"Looking great, Ms. Byers! Can I be of any use in the kitchen?" asked Mike.

"Aww, thank you, sweetie! Um, not right this second. You go keep El some company, but I may holler at you in a bit if I need some extra help," said Joyce.

"Alright, sounds good."

He stood behind the back of the couch and El tilted her head back to see him.

"Upside down kiss?" he asked.

"What's that?" she asked.

"This," he said, leaning her chin back a little more as he knelt down and kissed her face.

"You're so creative...I don't know how you come up with these things!" she said, completely smitten and enamored.

Then, he pushed himself over the couch, each of his legs flicking over the back of it like that of a spy action movie. He plopped down beside her and she turned and looked him in the eyes, his cheek to hers as they cuddled.

"I'm so glad your mom agreed to this."

You'd think that Mrs. Wheeler would've frowned upon both of her oldest children going elsewhere for the holidays, but she hardly ever seemed to notice when they were gone to begin with, so why would that be any different now?

"I am too. *chuckles* I mean, I can't blame her really...I would've been moping the entire day if I didn't get to see you," he said.

El blushes, smiles, looks into eyes

"You wanna watch the parade?" he asked, rubbing her arm which laid across his waist.

"The parade?"

"You've never seen the Thanksgiving Parade before?! Not even with Hop?"

"No. He doesn't- *clears throat* *didn't* celebrate much, but he tried to pretend like he did so that I didn't feel like I was missing out."

"Ah, gotcha. Well, we could always start our own tradition!"

"Yeah, I'd like that."

So, they cut on the tv and watched as the balloons came bobbing down Macy's Herald Square, talking about what they liked about each one that they saw.

"So, what are the Byers family traditions?" asked Mike.

"I don't know! I'm just as new to this as you are!"

"*scratches head* Yeah, I guess you have a point there."

"But there was one movie that Joyce said they watched every year...White Christmas, I think it was."

"White Christmas? But that's a Christmas movie! *laughs*"

"Yeah, well, they *clears throat* we aren't a very orthodox family...if you couldn't tell," she said coyly.

"Orthodox, huh? That's a big word."

"What are you, my *dad*?" she asked, laughing.

"No, I'm just saying I don't even use that word! That's all."

"Well, I'm more unpredictable than you think."

"Clearly!" he said.

"Anyway, they watch White Christmas because one year it had been on Joyce's mind, so they watched it and ended up watching every year after that as a way of kind of welcoming in the new season."

"I love that concept. That's really cool!"

"I thought so too..." she said with a giddy smile.

Mike was used to big family gatherings with more food put on the table than the Last Supper! He always had relatives coming to town from all over. So celebrating it this year with the Byers, who were probably the most introverted little family known to man, was very different for him, being the extrovert that he was. A part of him couldn't help but miss all of the people he had left behind in Hawkins that day, all of the funny stories he would never get to hear over his mom's scrumptious pumpkin pie, but he knew that he would've missed El even more and he couldn't bear that reality. She always came first and he wouldn't want to be around his family when his heart was in fact somewhere else. On the other hand, the only Thanksgiving El had ever known was with Hop and it hardly qualified as a meal. He wasn't much of a chef, so the only thing even remotely close to a Thanksgiving meal for them was some canned

peas and mashed potatoes along with store-bought, pre-sliced turkey because he burned the first one. It wasn't much, but even just imagining the smell of it all made her miss it and *him* so very much.

"Hey, I'll be right back," she said, patting his thigh before getting up.

"O-Okay," he confusedly said, removing the arms which he had held her with.

In that moment, she entered her room, closing the door behind her, now that she couldn't just do it at the drop of a hat. And she inched her way over to her old record player, where her dad first played her his favorite song- You Don't Mess Around with Jim. His death ruined it for her in some ways, as the song that once used to be his happy song, that once used to be THEIR happy song, was now just a song that made her mourn his absence in her life, but she still listened to it...every day. Every day, at any moment that she felt herself starting to miss him, she would go to her room, place the record on the turntable and just cry until she couldn't anymore. Hearing the song as much as he did, Will got a little annoyed after a while, but what did he know? His dad was never all that present in his life to begin with. However, sometimes Joyce would join El, as they both shared a special bond with him that led to their own bond with each other. Hopper would've wanted it that way anyway. She would play it over and over until she felt better, but at least she was coping. She wasn't going to keep these feelings all bottled up inside. She knew what she needed. She was afraid, however, that the record would break or suddenly stop working someday because of how often she played it and she wasn't ready to face that. Enough things in her life were already broken to begin with.

Meanwhile, Mike took this opportunity to spend some time with Will, who couldn't help but feel like a third wheel when it came to his best friend and his girlfriend, who also happened to be his sister.

"I'm sorry that I haven't really gotten the chance to spend time with you yet. I hope you understand, I don't mean for it to come off like I'm choosing El over you, but it's just hard because when I'm with her, I just, I don't know...I lose all track of time and the time that we have together just never feels like enough."

"It's okay, Mike. I mean, I'm not gonna lie, it's pretty fucking annoying sometimes, *chuckles* but I would probably do the same thing if I was in your situation."

"Well, I appreciate that and I hope that someday you'll meet some guy that really clicks with you and that you'll spend all your time with him instead of me, just to give me a taste of my own medicine."

Will laughs

Nancy and Jonathan however, were in the kitchen, fixing supper while bickering like an old married couple.

"No, no, you're doing it all wrong! You're supposed to do it like this," she said, demonstrating.

"Well, I'm SOR-RY, Ms. Perfectionist!"

"You should be!" she teased.

"You know, some would say that you bossing me around and helping me from behind is your way of flirting with me..." he said.

"Some would be right!" she said, hugging him around the waist.

Jonathan smiles, kisses head

Almost 10 minutes had passed and there was still no sign of El, so Mike decided to take matters into his own hands.

"*knocks twice* El, are you okay? Can I come in?"

She first stopped the music, then walked over to the door and opened it with misery written all over her face. He then reached a hand out to her cheek and wiped her tears away.

"Aww, El...Wha-What-What's wrong?"

She placed her hand on the one that held her face and closed in on it, bringing it to her side, where she led him over to her bed and played the record one last time.

"I'm playing this for you, so now you'll understand. You'll understand why I've been such a mess for the past 4 months."

"I've understood for longer than you've known...I-I'm having a hard time dealing it with myself, El."

"*looks up* You are?"

"*sniffles* Yeah, I mean, as much of a hard time as he gave me, I don't regret any of it. In fact, I miss him."

"You do?" she asked.

"Is that really so surprising?"

"Yes, actually!"

"El, your family is my family because you are my family."

blushes

"What do you miss about him?" she asked.

"I miss that comforting smell of salsa and cigarettes that used to be there whenever we made out...and now it's not."

"You too? *chuckles, sniffles* I thought I was the only one."

After they both laughed off their tears, they just sat there for a minute, side by side, hip to hip, with Mike rubbing the side of El's arm up and down, putting her at ease. She leaned her head against his shoulder and closed her eyes for a minute, imagining a world where her heart could finally be at peace and she could stay happy, but then she opened her eyes and lifted her head up, realizing that he *was* her world! He was her happiness.

"What? What is it?" he asked.

"*brushes fingers through bangs* N-N-Nothing, I just...I love you, that's all," she said, wrapping her arm around his neck, as she sat across his lap with a hand to his chest.

"Aww, I love you too!" he said, kissing her.

Then, he pulled away and looked her in the eyes, asking her:

"Are you feeling any better now? I mean, any less sucky?"

"*giggles* Yeah, yeah, I think I am," she said with a smile.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, stop worrying about me already!" she said, this time kissing *him*.

"I can't help it, it's my job," he said, his nose rubbing with hers.

Then, they each walked out of the room and into the next.

"Oh, you're just in time! Dinner's almost ready," said Joyce.

"Can't wait," said Mike.

"You know, it would've been ready earlier if you had lent us a hand in the kitchen," Nancy bitterly said.

"Hey, I offered! She didn't want my help," said Mike.

"True, neither would I," she said.

"Oh, I wouldn't even offer my help in the first place if I knew it was you who I was helping!"

"Children, children, settle down," said Joyce.

"Oh, we're just playing, aren't we, Mike?"

"Well, she is, I'm not," he joked.

Nancy hits

"What?! I'm kidding, of course! You know I love you, Nance," he said, giving her a side hug.

"Love you too, little bro," she said, giving him a noogie on the head.

"Alright, dinner is served!" said Joyce, setting the bowls out on the table.

"It looks amazing, Mom," said Will.

"Thank you, sweetie!" she said, kissing his head.

"So, what do we have here?" Mike, asked, licking his lips as he sat down, with a fork and knife in each of his hands.

"Turkey, ham, stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, gravy, green beans, pecan pie, and pumpkin pie, although I doubt it'll live up to Karen's cooking!"

"Oh, nonsense! You're a great cook too, Joyce," said Nancy, knowing that she was now of age to call her by her first name.

"If you say so..." she replied.

The dinner was everything El never knew it could be, with more food at the table than people to feed! Everything just felt right, like everybody there was exactly where they wanted to be...And El had never felt so much love in one room.

"Oh, I almost forgot, the final dish!" said Joyce.

"Oh, Mom, I don't know if I can eat one more bite..." Will groaned.

"Well, it's not *for* you...It's for El!"

"Me?" she repeated in disbelief.

"Welcome to the family, sweetie!" she said, sliding a plate of Eggo Extravaganza in front of her.

El looked at in awe, a single tear streaming down her cheek as her lip quivered into a smile. Without saying a word, she walked over to where Joyce was sitting. Feeling like she should, Joyce stood up. They each looked at each other, neither of them moving or quite knowing what to do next. And then suddenly, Joyce felt two soft arms wrap around her neck and hold her close as El sweetly said:

"Thank you, Joyce...for everything."

Now, it appeared that Joyce was the one getting choked up, as this girl that walked into her life like it was an open door, this girl that was once the daughter of the man she always thought she'd end up with, was now her own.

Once El sat back down, she turned to Mike and said:

"I could use your help because I probably won't finish this all by myself. *chuckles* Wanna split it?"

"Why not! I've already had so much food today, I might as well have more!"

El laughs, gets up

"Where are you going?" he asked, holding her by the arm.

"I'm getting some whipped cream."

"Oh, no, I'm not falling for that again!"

El throws head back in laughter

After a delicious dinner, the 6 of them all gathered around the television, inserted the tape, and proceeded to carry on with the Byers family tradition of watching White Christmas after a Thanksgiving meal.

Watching the beginning of the movie, Mike started to worry a little bit, as it started out in the middle of a war and he could never tell whether things like that would trigger El's PTSD or whether she would shrug it off like it was nothing because she had been through so much worse. Whichever it was, he was prepared for the worst.

During the "Sisters" scene, El turned to Mike and said:

"Kind of reminds me of when Max and I went shopping at the mall and got our pictures taken at the flash studio..."

"Yeah, I'm gonna need a few copies of those!" he said.

"*chuckles* Sure, I'll make sure to send you home with some."

"Good because at this point, I'll take any picture of you I can get, since we hardly see each other anymore," he said with his face close to hers.

"Shh!" said Will.

Mike rolls eyes, El chuckles to self

Then, when it came time for the number "The Best Things Happen While You're Dancing," Mike turned to El and whispered:

"They most certainly do and being at the Snow Ball with you was all the proof I needed."

El blushes, smiles big

During the song "Choreography," Mike could feel El's belly bluntly pushing his arms up and down in laughter. And during the number "Love, You Didn't Do Right By Me," El turned to Mike once again and said a simple:

"Pretty."

"That's quite the dress, huh?" he asked.

"It sure is...It's beautiful!" she said.

"You would look killer in that."

"Killer?" she asked, confused.

"Oh, it's just another way of saying stunning basically."

"Oh," she said with a smile, pulling his face in for a kiss.

Once the movie finally came to an end, it was just about time for Mike and Nancy to start heading home.

"Thanks again for having me," he said.

"Thanks again for coming," said El.

"God, I always hate this part..."

"Yeah, goodbyes are the worst..."

"I love you, El. I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you too...so so much."

In that moment, he pulled her close and hugged her with all his might. Then, he looked her in the eyes after pulling away and planted a big, long kiss on her lips, one that left her with an ache in her heart just after he walked out the door.

"Mike! Wait..." she said, running out to him.

"Yeah?" he said.

"Come back in. I won't keep you long, *holds hand* I promise. I-I just need to tell you something."

"Okay, sure," he said, letting her drag him to her room.

They each sat down on her bed, facing each other.

"What's this about?" he asked.

"I-I just needed to say that *takes deep breath* I'm so thankful for you *holds cheek* and so thankful to have you in my life and I don't know what I'd do without you. You mean everything to me and...I love you more than anything."

"You're thankful for me?! That's funny because *I'M* thankful for *YOU*! I mean, you just make my life so much better. Nothing is the same without you, El and I can't even imagine a world without you. You just...you're it for me. I don't know how else to say it."

And they kissed and kissed like it was all they knew, but of course it ended, as these things do. And so, he left, with a tear in his eye and a burden in his heart, the burden of leaving the one that he loved behind. But that would soon change because just as they were getting used to it all, things gradually started looking up.

3. Long Distance Makes You Crazy

Hey, guys! Hope you enjoyed my last chapter. It's always hard to start a new fanfic because not many people know about it yet, but please spread the word if you could because this one's gonna be a good one, I can feel it. I don't know about you guys, but I'm so ready for long distance Mileven this coming season. They're going to be relationship GOALS! I mean, they already are, but still...even more so. Anyway, enough of my rambling! Enjoy and feel free to leave a comment :)

It was 4:30 pm, the new 3:15 for Mike and El. The time that they would call each other to catch up and make sure they stayed in touch. They talked on the phone, however, because the connection via supercomm was too bad now that El lived so far away.

rings

"*picks up phone* Hello?"

"Hey, El, it's me."

"Hey, you. How are you?"

"Fine, I guess..."

"Mike, what is it? What's getting you down right now?"

"You want me to give it to you straight?"

"Yeah, I'd prefer it if my boyfriend didn't lie to me, even though boyfriends lie."

"Not anymore they don't. *sighs* Well, I guess you leave me no other choice then...*sighs* I hate not getting to see you every day..."

"That's it?"

"Well, yeah...I guess."

"*rolls eyes, laughs* You're such a dork!"

"So you don't miss me then I guess..."

"No, I do, but only because you're *my* dork!"

"Oh, well, in that case, I guess I better make a trip up there soon then, shouldn't I?"

"You better!"

"Oh just try and stop me!"

giggles

"*sighs* This long-distance thing is hard..." he continued.

"Mike..."

"What? It *is*!"

"Let's not go through this again."

"Go through what again?"

"The moping, the constant moping. You always mope about this and there's nothing we can do about it, but we're not about to break up just because you can't handle it. You're stuck with me. Sorry!"

"That's the girl I fell in love with..."

"What can I say? Blank makes me crazy too!"

"*smiles like an idiot* So, what have you been up to lately?"

"Nothing much."

"What do you think so far? Of your new house and town, I mean."

"It's alright. I'm still trying to get used to it. It's weird not being around you all the time. The only thing missing is you...well, and Max and everyone else, but mostly you."

"I feel the same way, except the only difference, is that I have everybody with me, yet I feel like I have nobody because you're not

here..."

"Aww, Mike...I can only imagine that if we were in the same place right now, that my face would be pretty close to yours right about now."

"*mouths to self 'God, she's cute'* Yeah, yeah, I think so too..."

"Mike..."

"Yeah?"

"I'm sad."

"Oh no! Not you too!"

El giggles

"Why are you sad?"

waits for answer

"It's your powers, isn't it?" he continued.

"Yeah...they're still gone, they still haven't come back yet."

"They will. I told you, I know they will."

"You don't know that..."

"Yes, I do! I know that your powers will come back just like I know that you'll be El Wheeler someday..."

"Wha-What did you just say?" she asked shyly, in a happy way, though not expecting those words to come out of his mouth.

"You heard me! I know, just like I know that you'll be El Wheeler someday."

"Mike Wheeler, I swear...If I could only kiss you right now...but I live so freaking far away, goddammit! Just know that I love you Mike...very much!"

"I love you too, El...so so much. And I have faith in you. If I can sense you in the Void, maybe I can sense when your powers are coming back too."

"*giggles* That's not how it works, dingus!"

"Oh yeah, and how *does* it work exactly?"

"It-Well, you see it um...I don't know..."

"That's what I thought. See, you don't know any better than I do!"

"*sighs* All I know is that it's been almost a month now and I don't know what I'm gonna do without them...I don't know how to live in a world where I don't have some control."

"So what? Would that really be so bad? You could finally lead like a normal life. Would I miss watching you kick some supernatural ass? Sure I would, but El, powers or no powers, you're still my El. You're still the most amazing, beautiful girl I've ever met and I will prove it to you in any way I know how."

"Thanks, Mike."

"No sweat! *smiles* And besides, I can help you try and get them back. You don't have to go through this alone, you know, we can do this together."

"Yeah, I'd like that."

In that moment, Mike thought back to the many times he would surprise El with a visit and she would jump into his arms and hold him so close and tight, tighter than she ever had. All of these wonderful memories gave him an idea...a grand idea.

"In fact, how 'bout tonight, huh? You and me, dinner at Enzo's, 7:30."

"Enzo's? You're taking me to Enzo's? Are we even allowed to do that?"

"Since when has not being allowed stopped you?!"

"*giggles* True, I am quite the troublemaker..."

"Do you think Joyce would let you take a bus over here?"

"Maybe...I'll have to check with her, but gosh, that sounds perfect...and romantic."

"What can I say? *I'm* a romantic."

"That you are," she said, giggling.

"You know Hop would *not* approve of this if he were here."

"You're talking about Hopper again!"

"Yeah...why?"

"Oh, nothing, I just haven't heard you talk about him in a while. It's just nice, that's all. It's a good thing, but yeah, you're right. I wouldn't get caught *dead* taking you out to a fancy dinner. He would kill me right then and there."

"Joyce however, is more understanding when it comes to that kind of thing."

"Lucky for me."

"Yeah, lucky for you..."

"Actually, I'm going to ask Joyce real quick, hold on," she continued.

"Okay."

[Several minutes later]

"Okay, I'm back."

"And...?"

"She said yes!"

"Oh, that's great!"

"Yep!" she said with a smile.

"*blushes* Well, I'll see you soon!"

"Okay, can't wait!"

"Alright, bye, El."

"Bye, Mike."

neither hangs up

"Aren't you going to hang up?" asked Mike.

"I thought you were going to!"

"No, I don't want to. I can't! You do it."

"No, you hang up! I don't want to either!" she said.

"No, *you* hang up!"

"No, *YOU* hang up!"

"Okay, there's only one way to settle this..." he said.

"I'm listening..." said El.

"We both don't hang up and we just stay on the phone with each other the whole time while we're both getting ready."

"Yep, that works."

"Alright, cool."

both laugh

And so they did just that, as they rummaged through their closets for the perfect outfit.

"Man, I don't know what to wear...Joyce washes clothes so much faster than Hop ever did, so I have way too many options."

"Well, what do you feel like wearing? What's speaking to you right now?"

"I have a couple of ideas, but I wanna mix and match a bit. What color do you like best on me?"

Mike smiled to himself like an idiot, trying to hold it together.

"Yellow, definitely yellow. It makes your skin glow."

"Aww, you're just saying that..."

"I'm not! I mean it. There was just something about that aztec-looking outfit you wore that one day that made everything inside me say yes."

"You-You remember that outfit?"

"Of course, I do! Maybe it was just the fact that you walked out in it right after I professed my love for you in front everyone, *chuckles* that I don't know. All I do know is how it made me feel in that moment, how *you* made me feel in that moment."

"*blushes* Mike, stop! *chuckles* Before you make me cry... *chuckles more, wipes tear* Oop, too late!"

Mike smiles

"Yellow it is," she continued.

"Lucky me," said Mike.

"Yeah, lucky you..." said El.

She went to her closet and took out a yellow off the shoulder top with a white bleach splotch pattern and a black, pinafore dress with a pencil skirt to put over, something that she had been dying to wear for a while now. Then, she laid them both out on her bed and took out a pair of black, t-strap kitten heels because she had always been a little too clumsy to walk in higher heels. El's taste was a little all over the place, a little flashy, but you couldn't deny the fact that it was punky and fun-loving and suited her nonetheless.

"So what about me then? *slides hangers on closet rack* What color looks best on me?" he asked.

"Hmm...I'd have to say green, dark green. It brings out the darkness in your eyes and hair."

"Really? *smiles, blushes* Thanks!"

"No need to thank me, just stating a fact."

"I'm actually surprised you said that."

"Really, why?"

"Well, Max said I looked like Ronald McDonald in that one dark green shirt with the yellow collar that I wore."

"Mike...C'mon! This is Max we're talking about! That's just how she shows love, you know that, and besides, you're the cutest Ronald McDonald I've ever seen."

"You really mean that?" he asked with a big grin.

"Yeah, I really do."

"You know, come to think of it, I was wearing dark green that same day when I said I loved you for the first time and you pretended that you didn't hear me."

"I think we may be onto something... *giggles*" she said.

"Well, green it is then. *smiles*"

"Lucky me!" she said.

"Yeah, lucky you..." he said.

He turned to his closet and sorted through his shirts until finally finding a dark green, button-down one that he usually wore around the holidays. Lucky for him, Christmas was only a couple weeks away. And so, he picked out a pastel, mint green blazer to put over the top of it and some slacks and cognac-colored, leather loafers to go with it.

After they both got changed, they each moved the phone to the

bathroom, where Mike shaved his face, put on a little aftershave, and combed through his hair as El put on some jewelry, a little perfume, some light makeup, and teased her hair a bit.

"Remember, don't put on too much makeup. You know how I feel about that..." said Mike.

"Of course not because otherwise, I'll get an earful from you about how I look most beautiful with none at all."

"Exactly. See, you're learning," he said flirtatiously.

El bites lip, closes eyes, smiles

"Well, Mike, as much fun as this has been, I gotta start making my way towards the bus station if we're gonna make our reservation."

"Good thinking, well, I love you and I'll see you soon."

"Love you too. Bye, Mike."

El hung up the phone and walked to the kitchen where she found Joyce cooking dinner for the boys.

"Oh, look at you, going on your big date! Give me a spin!"

Joyce twirls El's fingers as she spins around in her outfit

"That's my girl! *kisses forehead* You look lovely, sweetie!"

"*smiles toothlessly* Thanks, Joyce!"

"Did you remember to wear a slip with your skirt?"

"Yes!"

"Okay good, good. *looks her up and down* You know, I think it's time you start wearing pantyhose."

"P-Pantyhose?" El repeated, imagining both panties and a garden hose.

"Yeah, it's sorta like see-through, skin-colored tights. You would

normally wear it on fancy occasions like this."

"Oh okay. Where could I find a pair?"

"I think I have some in the top drawer of my dresser. Why don't you check?"

"Okay, I will. Thanks!"

"Sure thing, sweetie."

After putting on pantyhose, El bid farewell to her two new brothers-her family...her *new* family. They weren't perfect, but they made it work. No family really is anyway. Then, Joyce drove her, going over proper etiquette and table manners at a restaurant such as Enzo's. She then dropped El off at the Greyhound station, where they too said goodbye.

"*rolls window down* El!"

"*turns around* Yes?"

"Have fun, sweetie! See you at 10:00."

"Thanks, see you then!"

Once reaching the next station, she stepped out, only to find Mike waiting patiently for her with a bouquet of roses in his hand.

"Mike," El said quietly to herself, taking in his image.

Then, she cracked a big smile and ran towards him as he did to her. They both came to a sudden stop, probably about five feet apart from one another, not knowing how to proceed, as it all felt so surreal.

"Hi," said El.

"Hi, said Mike.

Then, she let out a squeal and ran towards him, pressing her hands against his cheekbones and her lips against his. Mike was so taken aback by her kiss, that he almost dropped the flowers.

"*blushes, smiles, eyes widen* Oh, I almost forgot! These are for you..."

"*takes flowers, smells them* Oh, Mike, these are lovely! Thank you!"

"Anytime. Well, shall we?" he asked, holding his hand out for her to hold.

nods, interlaces fingers with his

"You look beautiful by the way."

"So do you...handsome, I mean," she said, rubbing his arm with her other hand.

Mike smiles, blushes

They both walked together out of the station, where they met with Mike's mom.

"Hey, Mrs. Wheeler," said El.

"Hey there! Don't you look nice!"

"That she does..." said Mike.

"Thanks," said El.

Then, they hopped in the back of Mrs. Wheeler's car and went on there way.

"See you at 8:45, Michael."

"9:00?"

"No, 8:45. She has a curfew, remember? And you do too!"

"*sighs* Yeah, *throws arms in the air* how could I forget..."

"Bye, you two..." she said.

"Bye," they each said.

opens door for El

"You're too sweet...You do realize I could open that myself without even lifting a finger, right?" she teased.

"Um, El..."

"Oh, right! *says softer* Right...I can't do that...I can't do anything anymore."

"Aww, c'mere," he said, pulling her in for a hug, rubbing her back, and kissing her head as they waited for the hostess to seat them.

"Everything alright?" asked the hostess now before them.

"Yeah, sorry. Um, table for two," he said.

"Right this way," she said.

After they both sat down and got settled, the hostess turned to them and said:

"Your waiter will be with you shortly."

"*turns to Mike* I can't believe we got away with this...that you actually brought me here! This is perfect!" said El.

"Well, you're perfect, so it was the least I could do..."

"*smiles, blushes* So are you," she said with heart eyes, her cheek leaning on the palm of her hand as she gazed at him from across the table.

"It's hard to know what to do, you know, when we're together because we talk every day, so I have a pretty general idea of what's going on with you, yet at the same time, it feels like I have so much I wanna ask you. I don't know, I just wanna make the most of my time with you before you have to go back home. I'm sorry, I'm rambling... I-"

El places hand on his

Mike looks at hand, then her

"Mike, it's okay! I feel the same way."

"Oh, really? *sighs relief* Good."

"I love it when you get worked up about nothing...It's insanely cute," said El.

"R-R-Really?"

"*giggles, nods* Yes!"

"*clears throat* Sorry, to interrupt, but I'm Frank and I will be your waiter this evening. Can I start you two off with something to drink?"

"Uh, I'll just have water. What about you, El?"

El looked down at her menu, skimming through all of the various drinks listed.

"Um, I think I'll have the chee-ahnt-ee."

"El, no!" said Mike, making "cut it out" gestures at her from across the table.

"*furrows eyebrows, mouths* What?" asked El.

"Well, I'm afraid the *chianti* is an alcoholic beverage, young lady."

Now feeling flustered, El could sense her cheeks suddenly getting hot and reddening with embarrassment.

"*nervously chuckles* S-S-Sorry, she meant a Shirley temple," said Mike.

"Shirley temple it is!" said Frank, jotting down their order on his pad.
"Say, aren't you two a little too young to be dating?"

"We get that a lot, don't we, El?" he asked, reaching out and holding her hand across the table to make sure she was okay.

El nods and chortles

"Well, your boyfriend's quite the romantic, I'll give him that."

"Believe me, I know," she said without altering her gaze.

waiter leaves

[5 minutes later]

"Here you are," said Frank.

"Thank you, sir," said Mike.

"Mike, you know me so well! This looks so good..." El said as she took a sip of the Shirley temple.

"Well, I hope it lives up to its presentation."

El chuckles

"God, that's good!" she said.

"Sounds like it did," he said with a smile.

"You should try one of these rolls...They're delicious!" he continued with a mouthful.

"Ooh, don't mind if I do!" she said, taking one in her hand.

[7 minutes later]

"Pardon me, but are you both ready to order?" asked Frank.

"Oh, sure! Um, I'll have the dragon carrot risotto, please. *hands menu*" said Mike.

"*collects menu* Very good, sir! *turns to El* And for you, ma'am?"

"M-Marg-herita pizza, please."

"Very good, ma'am! *extends hand out for menu*"

"Oh, sorry! *hands menu*"

"No need to apologize, ma'am. You two have a lovely evening.
smiles"

Frank walks away

"He called me sir!" said Mike.

"He called me ma'am!" said El.

Mike laughs, sighs happily

"So, Mike..."

"So, El..."

"Tell me something!" she said.

"Like what?"

"I don't know...About you, Holly, Nancy, high school, our friends...
Anything."

"Okay, well, there was this one funny thing that happened the other
day in the cafeteria..."

"What happened?" she asked, with intrigue in her eyes and her chin
resting between her hands.

"Okay, so Dustin and Lucas and I were eating lunch with this guy
named Matty that we met at freshman orientation and the air
conditioning in the school has been out for a while, so sometimes
bees will fly in."

"Let me guess, one of them stung Dustin or Lucas!"

"No, not this time..."

"Oh."

"So, Matty thought it would be funny if he sucked one up a straw and
then blew it back out the window and-"

"Boys..." said El, rolling her eyes.

"Yep, we're a totally different species *winks*," he joked.

El smiles

"Anyway, well, let's just say one time, the bee actually went up the straw and flew into his mouth and...well, you can put the rest together yourself."

"Oh my god! I wouldn't know whether to laugh or feel sorry for him."

"No, trust me it was pretty funny! *chuckles* His eyes grew so big and he was swatting it away like a maniac, but it stung him on the lip!"

wheezes

"I'm not even done yet!" said Mike.

"There's *more*? I don't know if I can take it! *laughs more*"

"Well, neither could Lucas because he was laughing so hard that spaghetti came out of his nose!"

"Shut up! No it did not!"

"It did!"

laughs hysterically, snorts

"Did you just snort?"

"Maybe..."

laughs harder

"Well, what about you? What do you think of high school?"

"It's kind of scary...I don't know, it's just so big, you know, and everybody has their own group of friends and people that they sit with and the teachers all talk a mile a minute..."

"I totally get that. Well, just know that I'm one call away if you need someone to vent out to."

"I love knowing that," she said with a smile.

"*clears throat* Here you are!" said Frank, placing their food out in front of the both them.

"Thank you, Frank," said El, placing her napkin in her lap as Joyce had reminded her to do.

[15 minutes later]

"So, what have you been listening to these days?" asked Mike.

"Well, you know I listen to the pop stations mostly, but lately, I've been drawn to the blues again."

"Aww, really? I remember when you used to listen to that all the time when we were first dating...What brought that up again?"

"I don't know, I guess it just makes me happy, but at the same time, it reminds me of home and-and Hop, if I'm being totally honest..."

"*holds hands* El, there's nothing wrong with listening to something that reminds you of your dad. You should try to keep his memory alive in any way that you can. And besides, that's what the blues is all about, right? Being vulnerable with your feelings and singing your truths."

"*wipes tear* Yeah, I guess you're right."

cries more

"Oh, El, I'm sorry. I-I shouldn't have brought that up, I don't know what I was thinking...I-"

"It-It's not you, it's just- *sniffles* This is where Hop and Joyce were gonna go on their first date, but he-he never made it and now he's gone and *shivers* I don't live here anymore- *breaks down, sobs* I'm sorry, Mike!"

"Oh, El..."

backs up chair, rushes over to her, kneels down

"Don't be sorry...it's okay! I'm here. Mike's here," he said as he held her in his arms.

By the time the waiter started coming back, they had both finished their meals and El had stopped crying enough to be verbal. So, Mike headed back to his seat and made sure to put his money down before she could.

"Mike, no! You are *not* paying for this whole thing!"

"The hell I am!"

"Why are you doing this for me? It's so expensive!"

"Because...you're my girl."

"*says endearingly* I love you...but Mike Wheeler, *huffs* I swear to god, if I had my powers right now, I would snatch that money right out of your hand."

"I'm sure you would...*will*," said Mike.

"Will?"

"Yeah! You'll have plenty of other chances once they come back."

"If you say so..." she said, doubting herself once again.

They walked out the door together, hand in hand, with only a little time left to kill, but so much more they wanted to do.

"What do you miss most about Hawkins, El?"

"That's way too easy! *takes deep breath, looks in eyes* You."

"*blushes* See, this is why I love you and believe me, you're the only thing that's missing *from* it, but I'm serious. What do you miss about it most...*aside* from me?"

"I don't know...I guess I've never really thought about it before, but... I'd have to say the little gallery hops you used to take me to at the beginning of each month, and the costume contest that we entered as

Han Solo and Princess Leia. I don't know, just a little of everything I guess...Oh and Lovers' Lake! How could I forget!"

"Well, I was hoping you'd say some of that because I made you a little assortment of Hawkins things...Well, mostly from stuff we've done together. Ticket stubs from movies we've seen, the ribbon from our costume contest, jewelry I secretly bought you at the gallery hop but have been waiting for the right occasion to give to you, a rock from Lovers' Lake, rose petals from flowers I've gotten for you, but I guess that doesn't have much purpose now, since I already bought you flowers, but um...let's see, a candle from the church...Ooh, and a receipt from the bowling alley, but that's kind of lame I gue-"

"Mike, *pulls collar towards her* stop talking," she said, kissing him in middle of the vacant town streets.

The whole time he said all of these wonderful things, she felt nothing less of amazing simply because her boyfriend was amazing. He always knew how to put a smile on her face, even when she was the most depressed she had ever been, even when she had lost all hope.

"*pulls away* What was that about?"

"I love you, that's what!"

"Oh, well, I love you too," he said as-a-matter-of-factly.

"You wanna just walk around a little bit?" he continued.

"Yeah, I'd like that," she said, linking arms with him.

So, they took a nice, long stroll until they came to the agreed-upon pick-up spot where Mrs. Wheeler would meet them. And so, they rode the whole way, snuggling in the backseat, practically inseparable...until they had to be.

"Why do all of our dates have to end this way?" he asked, holding her close by the waist.

"I don't know...but I'm gonna miss you like crazy!"

"You know I will...but hey, *holds shoulder, looks into eyes*

Christmas is just around the corner."

"Lucky me," she said.

"Yeah, lucky you..."

Mike looked down at her lips and bent down to kiss her, his arms wrapped around her lower back and she stood up on her tippy toes and kissed him back with love so apparent. When they pulled away, he held her chin between his thumb and index finger and rubbed it for a split second. Then, he said:

"Well, I guess this is it...for now."

"Yeah, for now."

"I love you, El...more than anything."

"I love you too, Mike...also more than anything," she said coyly.

"Don't forget your flowers and the little Hawkins memento I put together for you."

"I wouldn't dare!" she teased. "Goodbye, Mike."

Mike lightly wails

"*leans head against his, puts hand on chest* Sorry, bad word choice. See you soon...love. *kisses, walks away*"

"Soon," he repeated, like he needed to remind himself that this wasn't permanent.

4. It's No Noel Without El

Hey, guys! I just wanted to let you know that I will probably be posting new chapters a little less frequently from here on out because school starts back up for me in a couple of days. That being said, I really take my writing seriously, as it is a priority of mine, so I will try to post new chapters as much as possible. Love you all!

XOXO,

Kate

It was the day before Christmas Eve, the day which some people might call Christmas Eve Eve. The sky was foggy, the streets were covered in a blanket of snow, and a familiar green Ford Pinto turned into Mike's driveway. This was no surprise, of course. It was a highly anticipated visit, one that Mike had been looking forward to for weeks. This was the day that Joyce would bring Will, Jonathan, and El to Hawkins for the party's first real get-together since they moved out. Hearing the sound of Joyce locking her car with the key fob, Mike rushed over and stood by the door with a thousand thoughts racing through his head. *What should I do? What should I say? What if she grew her hair out? Has she met someone else?* He wanted everything to go as smoothly as possible. He wanted to make the most of his time with El because he never knew when would be the next time he would get to see her and he couldn't wait one second longer.

El shyly walked up to the big house she had come to know as her home for a short time and decided that there were no first impressions left to make. Mike knew her, inside and out and his parents were aware of her powers as well. So, she stared down the door until it creaked open, but what she didn't know was that Mike's hand was already on the door knob, ready to turn it and run out to her. And suddenly, there he was. Same round, jagged-edged, raven hair that stopped just at his cheekbones, same deep, espresso-colored eyes, same bony nose with a soft tip that pressed right against her cheek whenever they kissed, same lips that she kissed when she missed him most. Same tall, thin, stripe-wearing Mike Wheeler she had loved all of her life...all of her *real* life. The life that Mike had

made for her.

"Mike!" she shrieked with excitement, running towards him, then coming to a sudden stop.

"*smiles, looks into eyes* Hi," she said, this time more calm and shy than before.

They hugged, long and intimate, with their hands cradling each other's backs and heads. Then, their faces left one another's shoulders and found their way back to each other, with El unexpectedly reaching a hand up to Mike's sweet face, giving him a quick peck on the lips, and stepping off of her tippy toes.

He blushed and broke eye contact for a second, looking down at the floor, then back at her. Realizing that they were holding up Ms. Byers, Jonathan, and Will, they stepped out of the doorway, with Mike's arm around her, clutching the side of her shoulder and saying:

"Sorry, *chuckles* we're kind of big fans of hellos."

"Yeah, we noticed," said Will.

Then, he let go of El and leaned in for a hug with Will.

"*pats back* How've you been, man?"

"Oh you know, can't complain."

"Glad to hear it...Well, please, come in!"

"Thanks, Mike," said Joyce. "How are you, sweetie?" she continued, leaning in for a quick hug.

"I'm great, thanks. Can I get you all anything to eat?"

"Oh, that's nice of you, but we actually just made a stop at Burger King before we got here," said Jonathan.

"Is that Jonathan Byers I hear?" asked Nancy coyly.

"You caught me!" he said jokingly.

"Hey, you! I missed you. *kisses*"

"I missed you too, Nance. *half smiles*"

They each walked in and got settled, greeting each of their friends, while Mike on the other hand, was still obsessing over the fact that the girl he loved was finally back home. He just couldn't get enough of her, so he kept her all to himself until he knew he couldn't any longer. He picked her up and spun her around in his arms.

"Whoa! Mike, what are you doi-"

"*noses touch* God, did I miss you!"

"*giggles* What was that about?"

"I told you, *lowers El so she meets his face* I missed you."

El looks to see if anybody's around

kisses Mike with open mouth

There was something about El's kiss that made Mike just melt. Though she used to barely even be verbal, she felt most comfortable when she was around Mike. She felt like she could fully be herself and didn't even worry about how stupid she might sound. She knew that Mike wouldn't care, that he would accept her and find anything she did cute anyway, but even so, she still from time to time would let her actions speak for her, like Mike taught her to do when he kissed her as he tried to explain the type of person you go to school dances with.

"El!" said Max, running over to her.

"Max!" said El, catching her in a hug.

"Oh my god, it's been way too long! We have so much to catch up on!"

"We really do!" she said, leaving Mike wondering if there was something she wasn't telling him.

Dustin, on the other hand, was also waiting by the door for a special someone and that someone was Suzie.

doorbell rings

Dustin runs fingers through hair, straightens shirt

opens door

"Suzie Poo?"

"Dusty Bun!" she exclaimed, running into his arms.

"Oh, Suzie Poo, I missed you so much!"

"I missed you more," she said in her bubbly little voice.

"The trip here wasn't too bad, I hope...?"

"No, it was just fine!"

"Glad to hear it. Well, please, come in! I want to introduce you to my friends and maybe show you off a little too."

"Aww, Dusty..."

Dustin throws arm around Suzie, walks away

"Guys, this is Suzie, Suzie, this is Mike, Lucas, Max, Will, and El," he said, pointing to each and every one.

"Hi, guys! *waves*"

"We've heard so much about you," said Max.

"Yeah, Dustin wouldn't ever shut up about you," said Will.

Dustin hits Will

Will mouths 'Ow'

"Well, I could say the same about all of you!" she said with a smile.

"So, you sing, huh?" asked Lucas.

Dustin hits again

Lucas also mouths 'Ow'

"Yes, in fact, I've been in show choir and a bunch of musicals at my school."

"That's cool! Who's your favorite actress, Phoebe Cates?"

Dustin hits Mike

Mike too mouths 'Ow'

"What's going on?" asked Suzie.

"Will you three cut it out? I don't behave this way around your girlfriends," said Dustin.

"Yeah, well, that's because our girlfriends are your friends," said Mike.

"Well, Suzie could be yours too if you gave her a chance."

"He's right," said Lucas.

"Sorry, we were just playing around. It's really nice to meet you Suzie, truly," said Mike.

Suzie was different from the other girls. She was much more like the boys, with her curiosity and hunger for knowledge, while Max and El, on the other hand, were fierce, but just as girly. Max tried her best to make sure Suzie felt included, knowing how it felt to be the new girl, despite how annoying she sometimes found Suzie to be.

Now, one might think that Joyce was feeling pretty lonely that day with Bob and Hopper no longer in her life and no real close, adult friends of her own, but since Mrs. Wheeler found out about all that had happened to Hopper after having seen them together at the fair, she was really feeling for Joyce and was really there for her at the funeral. In fact, she made it a priority to get to know her better and

include her whenever she could. She found that while on paper, she and Joyce were very different people, that they actually had a lot more in common than either of them ever thought they would.

"Joyce! *finishes sipping from wine glass, sets down* Oh my gosh, it's so good to see you!"

"Hi, Karen, how are you?"

"I'm great, thanks! Can I get you something to eat or drink?"

"I think I'm fine for now, but maybe later, thanks."

"Alright. Well, tell me, how's the new house?! I couldn't really get the sense of how you felt about it over the phone."

"Well, we're still taking some time to adjust, but I'm liking it so far. It still feels like something's missing though...I mean, I feel like I left my whole life behind here."

"That's totally understandable that you feel that way. *rubs shoulder*"

"Yeah. It's just different, in all regards, but I feel comfort in knowing that we're finally safe and not living in constant fear and distress."

"*grasps top of her hand* I'm glad too. *removes hand* You've had a rough few years, that's for sure."

"Yeah, tell me about it!" she said.

both laugh

Meanwhile, as Mike hung out with Will and El with Max, El started to look a little uncomfortable and anxious. Max soon realized it had something to do with either Mike or Will, as she was staring intensely in their direction. Perhaps it had to do with the both of them...And that's when El finally told Max the truth, the truth about Will and who he really liked.

"El? Seriously?! I mean, you know I believe you, but Will, likes you? I mean, c'mon, let's be real here!"

"What do you mean be real? I'm totally serious!"

"You do realize he's gay, right?"

"No...I didn't. Are you sure?"

"I mean, not 100%, but Lucas has told me some stuff. I'm pretty sure he is."

"Well, I don't know anything about that. All I know is that when he kissed me last night-"

"Whoa, hold the phone! He kissed you?!"

"Keep your voice down! Yes, he tucked me in for bed and then he just kissed me."

"That's just wrong...on like so many levels!"

"I *know*! What am I gonna tell Mike?"

"Are you kidding?! Nothing! You can't tell him anything! Don't get him involved at all! This will lead to no good, El, trust me!"

"But, friends don't lie..."

"It's not lying if you're withholding information...After all, ignorance is bliss!"

"Ignorance?"

"Never mind, not important."

"But Max, we tell each other everything. We're completely open and honest with each other!"

"Oh yeah, because he was totally telling the truth when he said he was with his Nana!"

"That was one time...and besides, it was my dad who encouraged him to do that...**suddenly gets sad**"

Max noticed this and then said:

"You know what? Forget what I said. You're probably right anyway! If you wanna tell him, just tell him."

"Thanks, Max. I will."

El walked over to the sea of people before her, all of whom were her friends, all except for one. One very special person...and that person was Mike. He was much more to her than a friend. He was the love of her life and she was his. She walked over to him and asked if they could talk...alone, as if they hadn't had a minute all to themselves in ages. He agreed and they walked off together, holding hands like nothing had changed. They walked to the little bathroom in the basement, an odd place for most, but to them it was the place where they almost kissed, the place where they could get a moment away from everyone if they needed to talk...that is as long as Dustin didn't interrupt them for the 40 millionth time.

Once inside, Mike leaned against the sink, his hands pushing off of it with his back turned away from the mirror. El faced him, having trouble getting the words out that she needed to say.

"So, what's up? What'd you wanna talk to me about?"

"Listen, Mike, there's no real easy way to say this because I know that you and Will are really close, but-"

"*crosses ankles, shifts position* Wait, this is about Will?"

"Yeah."

"Oh, *eases up* I thought this was about us."

"Well, it is...but-"

"But what?"

"Jesus, Mike! Will you let me talk?"

"Sorry, yeah, *shakes head* yeah, go ahead," he said.

"*blurts out* W-Will kissed me!"

"I'm *sorry...What?*"

"I was trying to go to sleep the other night, but you know how I usually have trouble getting to sleep at first?"

"Yeah...?"

"Well, Will normally stays with me until I dose off, just in case I have a night terror or something."

"Whoa, whoa, hold on a second...*pulls El closer to body by the wrists, holds her waist* You didn't tell me you were having nightmares again...Why?"

"*looks in eyes and puts hand on cheek* I don't know, I guess I just didn't want you to have to worry about me."

"*holds hands, moves them with his while speaking* I want to worry about you...because I love you and I don't want anything bad to happen to you ever again for as long as I can help it."

"Oh, Mike! *smiles, slides hand behind ear, kisses*"

Several minutes later, they walked out of the bathroom together, with Mike more confused than before they even talked. They got so distracted by each other that El didn't even get to finish telling him what happened. So, he decided to take matters into his own hands. He decided to have a moment with Will of his own.

"Hey, Will, can I talk to you for a sec?"

"Yeah, su-su-sure."

"SHIT! Shit, this is bad...this is bad!" El said to Max.

"Yep...Mike's totally gonna kick his ass," said Max.

"MA-AX!"

"What?!"

"Not helping!"

"Sorry, I just really wanna see Wheeler win an argument for once...I think it would be entertaining!"

El imitates her own murderous stare without actually using powers

"Okay, okay, I'll shut up now!"

"I didn't even get to tell him how it happened...We kinda started kissing."

"Of course you did! *rolls eyes, pauses* Wait, how *did* it happen though?"

"Well, he was staying with me until I fell asleep and then, he kissed my head when he thought I was sleeping."

"El, you could've specified where he kissed you!"

"I didn't know that it made a difference..."

"Oh, it makes a difference...a huge difference!"

Meanwhile, Mike and Will were having a chat of their own.

"Will, El has brought something to my attention that uh...*shakes head* just doesn't quite make sense."

"Okay...?"

"She uh...*chuckles* she said that you um...kissed her. Is that true?"

"What? No! Of course not!"

"I want to believe you, but I know that El wouldn't lie to me...but then I also know that you had feelings for me, so that only makes this more confusing."

"Well, wait...I think I might've kissed her head one time, right after she dosed off."

"And it didn't occur to you how confusing that could possibly be for her?! Even if parents do kiss their child's head, siblings don't and especially not guys our age, unless you liked her."

"I'm sorry I don't know what I was thinking then, but I don't like her...I mean, I do like her, as a person, as a friend, but nothing more than that, I swear."

Mike pauses to process

"Will..."

"Yeah?"

"It's okay."

"Really?"

"Yeah, it's fine. I know you didn't mean it to come off that way. You couldn't have known that she would blow it out of proportion like this."

"Thanks for understanding," said Will.

"Of course *pats and rubs back*, he said.

As soon as they were done talking, Mike looked around for El, but she was nowhere to be found. There was only one place left to look... the fort. And sure enough, there she was.

lifts curtain Hey. Thought I might find you here. Have you been hiding from me?"

"Maybe..." she said.

crawls inside, pulls curtain down Scoot over," he said.

anxiously fiddles with and picks at fingernails I'm sorry about all of this...I probably ruined everything."

"It's okay, El, really, I-I'm not mad at either of you, not anymore at least."

"Really?"

"Yeah, but El?"

"*looks up from nails* Yeah?"

"I'm concerned about you..."

"Why?"

"Because when you had powers, you used to beat bad guys up sometimes, but ever since your powers have stopped working, the only person you've been beating up is yourself and I hate it. I just want you to love yourself like I love you."

"I can't help it...I just. I don't know. All of you guys live so far away now and that's hard enough as it is, but I also don't feel like I really have a purpose without my powers. Like how can I protect you *holds chin* and everyone else? *looks down at nails* I just feel..."

"What?"

"I just feel...empty and lonely, like all the time. And I just don't know what to do about it sometimes."

"I'll tell you what to do about it, you call me. You call me and you talk to me about it. I'm only one call away, El, and literally all I want is for you to be happy. I've been through stuff too, but we can get through this together. You don't have to do it alone. You're never alone as long as we're together."

"I know because I have you," she said, smiling and rubbing his leg.

"And besides, we don't even know for sure if they're completely gone. Don't give up just yet, El."

"Have I ever told you how much I loved you?"

"You mentioned it once or twice."

playfully punches his shoulder

"C'mere, you," he said, pulling her in for a one lingering kiss before they both went back to reality and spent time with the rest of the party.

Suddenly, El felt herself start to levitate a little bit off of the ground. This startled her, but she immediately readjusted herself and held onto Mike for dear life so she wouldn't float. Though just a slight movement, El knew it meant more. No, this was something different. It was small enough not to make her nose bleed, but significant enough for her to know that she was somewhat in touch with her powers again and what a comforting feeling that was. In that moment, Mike sensed that El was nervous or that something was distracting her and he pulled away, saying:

"Hey, is everything alright? You seem a little jittery."

"Ye-Yeah, I'm fine. I'm-I'm great actually."

"That's what I like to hear."

As they kissed, with their arms wrapped around and cradling each other, she could feel his heartbeat against her chest, and that's how she knew that she was okay. That she was happy. That she was home.

5. That Good Ole Mistletoe Glow

Have you ever written a chapter and going into it, you know what you want to happen, but then as you're writing it, something completely different emerges from it? Because that totally happened to me in writing this, lol. This chapter is more so just leading up to the events of the next chapter, which I've already started writing. Hope you like it though! Feel free to comment. (P.S. I love how Mike puts his own curiosity aside to act on his romantic feelings and tendencies.)

[Christmas Eve]

"El...Am I crazy, or is there a piece of mistletoe floating in the air?"

"Mike-" she said, interrupting herself by approaching his face.

"El...your-your nose, *points* it's-"

"I know..." she said with a smile, placing a hand behind his ear and gazing down at his lips.

He looked at her, his face full of shock, as he was still processing the whole thing.

"But-But I thought-"

"*wipes away blood from nose* Mike, just shut up and kiss me already! This mistletoe's not gonna hold itself," she said, each of her words, an echoing breath against his lips.

"Right, sorry! *dorkily chuckles*"

And so, he placed his hands on the side of her neck, his thumbs resting on her cheekbones. He walked towards her, moving in on her face, slowly but surely. His forehead now resting against hers, he looked her in the eyes with intention, his eyelashes brushing upon her skin as he closed them. Then, he latched his lips onto hers, her bottom lip running through his teeth. And his nose bulldozed into her cheek, nudging her face back as his head moved in agreement with her lips and her chin moved in unison to his.

Lips letting go with a light smack, he released her from his embrace. And his elbows escaped from the cups of her hands, leaving her with an empty feeling...All until his eyes found their way back to hers, holding her hostage with his gaze and imprisoning her in his love.

Silent and frozen in place with a focus that couldn't be altered, she was completely captivated by the eyes before her. These vulnerable circles of brown, so charming and so telling, perforated by his pupils which had enlarged at the sight of her. It was almost like she was peering into his soul, seeing not only the good and the bad, but the beauty in him too. Staring at them endlessly made them seem like tunnels in that way. And within an instant, she felt her grip loosen on the floating mistletoe and exhaled in relief as it hit the floor, just as it all hit her...all of these loving feelings that she didn't quite know what to do with. So, she decided to act on them.

Once standing on tippy-toes, she was finally at his level, her eyes still fixed on his. She was completely under his spell and it gave her clarity...it gave her a love that she never thought could be, so what was the hurt in asking for a little more? It just felt so right, so much so that she wasn't ready to let go just yet. And so, she hooked her arms around his neck and kissed him with all her might. And he bent down, hugging her lower back in one arm and her waist in the other, their abdomens nearly touching behind their clothes. Lost in his eyes and found in his arms, she felt reborn.

"*pulls away and smiles* I have so many questions about your powers, but I-I don't want to talk about that right now..." he said, holding her hands.

"Me neither," she said, shaking her head and smiling, their faces still close.

"You-You don't?"

"No, that conversation can wait, and besides, there's nothing wrong with getting a little distracted from time to time, don't you think?"

"Yeah, I do. I mean, we've certainly waited long enough to rekindle this *use air-quotes* spark between us. I think this is just the first step."

"Do you wanna go somewhere more private? Your room perhaps?"

"Did you really even have to ask?" he said.

"*El smiles big, takes his hand in hers* C'mon then! What are you waiting for?" she asked, dragging him up the steps.

El liked seeing Mike this way, more focused on her than her powers because, for most people, her powers were all they saw, but Mike was different.

Lying on their sides, hands in her hair, feet rubbing against hers, arms around his back, slithering down his neck and to his chest, it was safe to say that they made out for quite some time...That was until the thought of her powers came creeping back into his head.

"Wait, El?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm overwhelmed with curiosity right now...H-H-How did your powers come back?"

"Well, if I'm being completely honest, the first time that I noticed it was when we were kissing in our fort."

"What? Why didn't you just say so? *puts hand in lap*"

"I was just too scared to tell you because the whole thing had freaked me out."

"But how did you know they were coming back?"

"I kind of levitated."

"And you weren't trying to?"

"No, but the first time I levitated, I didn't have any control over it either, it just kind of happened. I don't know how to explain it really..."

"Was it kind of like this power just sort of manifested inside of you?"

"Yeah, exactly!"

"Then what do you think gave you the strength to levitate?"

"I-I think *you* did. I think somehow, you brought it out in me. You made me believe in myself again and your energy just fed into mine. You helped me see just how powerful I actually was when I was powerless."

"Believe me, I only tried to bring out what was already there all along. I know that you've always felt like an outsider, that you've always felt different from others, but your powers, growing up in that godforsaken lab, being an orphan for most of your life, learning English and social cues late...none of that is what makes you *you*. I mean, sure, it plays a part in it and it's a big part of your identity, but that's not *all* that makes you special. You're your own person too, you know, aside from all of the difficult circumstances you've been put through. Being different is who you are, it's what makes you stand out and you should embrace that."

"Well, thanks to you, now I know how to separate myself from my powers. *kisses*"

"*smiles briefly* So, so far, all you can do, that you know of, is levitate and lift small things."

"S-S-Sorry, I shouldn't have put it like that I-I- Obviously you can do a lot more than just those things, I just meant powers-wise."

"Mike...It's okay! You respect me better than anyone I've ever met. Don't feel like you have to justify yourself all the time for my sake."

"O-Okay, sorry...*dorkily chuckles*"

"But to answer your question, yes, that's all I can do so far."

"We should try and test it out, the different things you can do. I mean, if you want to of course."

"Yeah, let's do that soon."

"I don't really know a lot about how to bring them out, like what

activates them or anything, I mean, I can only base it off of what you've shown me in the past, but I'll try to help you the best I can."

"Just you being here is already more than enough. The fact that you've stuck by my side through all of this and never gave up on me once means everything to me."

"*smiles, lightbulb goes off* Hey, you said that Kali kind of taught you how to have more control over your powers and make them more effective, right?"

"Yeah..."

"And she's like, what, 10 years older than you?"

"Yeah...why?"

"Well, I was thinking...what if you and I go see her and try to figure out how these powers that all of you have came to be exactly. I think if we knew more about that, we might have a better understanding of what we're dealing with here."

"I-I don't know about that..."

"Why not?"

"Be-Because...you don't know what it's like where she lives, what *she's* like. I know that she cared about me, Mike, but she wasn't willing to give up her dangerous, law-breaking lifestyle. She wasn't willing to sacrifice her belief and obsession with revenge to be in my life."

"If it's too painful for you, then just forget it. I just thought it might help."

"It's not too painful, but-but what if she hates me?"

"*Hates* you? How could she hate you?"

"I don't know, for leaving her to be with you..."

"She doesn't hate you, El! She knows you did the right thing, even if she disagrees with it."

"You know, I didn't even think about this, but she's probably even angrier at you than she is at me because you're the sole reason I left in the first place. *turns to Mike, grabs him by the shirt* Mike, I don't wanna go...*shakes head* I'm scared that she'll hurt you and I won't be able to stop her because my powers haven't fully come back yet."

"El, whoa, whoa, calm down! You're making a mountain out of a molehill-"

"A *who* out of a *what* now?"

"It's an expression. *sighs* Just don't worry about it. You're jumping to conclusions and getting worked up about nothing! She's not going to hurt me."

"*tears up* But everyone in my life gets hurt! *sobs*"

"Hey, hey, hey," he said, pulling her close to his chest, rubbing her back as he hugged her tightly.

"Everything's going to be okay, alright? *kisses head* I promise. I'm not going anywhere! *holds sides of face with palms touching her hair and temples* You just have to trust me on this one."

"*sniffles* You're really not worried about her?"

"No, not at all."

"Okay, then, I guess we can go. I mean, I would like to know how I lost them in the first place..."

"Yeah, exactly! It was just totally out of the blue."

"Yeah, but Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"You do realize I'm gonna need my powers back just to find her in the first place, right?"

"Dammit! You're right...Well, you have a general idea of where you last saw her is in the city, right?"

"Yeah, but something tells me that that wasn't a permanent home, that she's moved multiple times since I last saw her...She was constantly running away from the law and the cops found her hideout at one point when I was with her, so she had to have relocated and I have no idea where that would be."

"Well, we'll just have to manage on our own until then, but we can do that. I know we can."

"I do too," she said, hooking pinkies with him, shaking them back and forth in a togetherly kind of way.

"You know, actually, come to think of it...Hop had a bunch of files on Hawkins Lab, back from when he was investigating what went on behind the scenes there, thinking that Will was somehow mixed up in all of it. I still have them. I kept them because I thought that they might come to some use someday."

"El! *kisses head with a 'mwa' sound* You're a genius!" he said with enthusiasm.

El smiles and blushes

Me? A genius? She never thought she would hear those words come out of Mike's mouth, let alone anyone's. *I'm not smart, I barely even know my ABC's, I can hardly even count to my own name!* she thought to herself. But El often took herself for granted, as she had emotional intelligence beyond her years. Just because you're still learning about the way that the world works doesn't mean that you're not bright in other ways. Despite not believing in his compliment, it made her feel special, like she wasn't just another girl. Like she stood out in all of the right ways.

"Oh shoot...I don't have them with me, so I'll have to look through them when I get home."

"That's okay, just call me when you do and we can talk through and make sense of it together."

"Will do," she said.

And so they spent every waking moment together until it was time

for them both to go to bed. Lucky for Mike, their parents had cleared a sleepover as long as El slept downstairs. But he felt comfort in knowing that she was living in his house once again, even if it was just for the holidays.

6. O Holy Mike

The smell of fallen pine needles scattered beneath the tree, the heat of the fireplace hitting your skin, the sounds of people laughing and singing carols next door, the taste of egg nog lingering in your mouth and throat, with decorations and lights everywhere you see. All were new sensations for El, leading her to believe that Mike was right- there was in fact, no happier, more magical time of the year than Christmas.

The night before Christmas, however, Mike and El had agreed that whoever got up first would wake the other person up. El usually liked to sleep in, that was when she could get a wink of sleep at all, but being as excited as she was about spending Christmas with her boyfriend, she struggled to stay asleep and instead popped up early. Quietly tiptoeing up the stairs, she came to find that Mike too was already up, with his back turned to the basement door.

After spending as much time with the boys as she had over the past year, she knew all of their tricks. So, seeing that he was turned around, she decided to put her powers to the test and tap him on the shoulder from behind with her mind, knowing that he would look in the wrong direction the first time she did so.

"Ha! Gotcha!" she said.

"Wha-How?" he replied.

"Figured out I could do that one yesterday..." she said coyly.

He smiled, proud, while also amused by her playfulness. Then, he brought her fingers to his lips and kissed her knuckles, continuing to hold her hands afterward.

"Why were you turned around anyway?" she asked.

"Oh, I-I was gonna wake you up, but it was kind of early and I didn't know if you were still sleeping. I kept nearly opening the door, but then stopping myself because I didn't want to disturb you. I don't know why I'm telling you all of this... *dorkily chuckles, shakes

head* You get the idea."

"Quit worrying, Wheeler! *kisses*"

smiles and blushes

"*eyes light up, blurts out* Hey! *pauses, holds waist, then says in a soft voice* Merry Christmas..."

"Merry Christmas," she said, her smile projecting onto his.

"So, what do you wanna do now?" he asked.

"I don't know...No one else is up yet."

"Yeah, I know. Well, I guess we could just make some eggos and watch something quietly until everyone's ready to open presents and stuff."

"Sounds good to me."

Though he hid it well, Mike was secretly really eager to give El her present already. Little did she know the trouble he went through to get it for her. There was even a whole story about it.

[3 Months Prior, Starcourt Mall]

"Do you think anything survived in the fire?" Mike asked the fireman.

"Probably a few things. The damage was less extensive in some areas more than others...Why?"

"Well, you see, there was this ring that I was going to buy for my girlfriend and-"

"Oh, god, give me a break, kid!"

"*furrows brows, shrugs* What?"

"You're one of *those* kids!"

"What do you mean one of *those* kids?"

"One of those kids who proposes to their girlfriend before they're even out of high school."

"What? No!"

"Uh huh..."

"Look, I realize I'm just some stupid kid, so why even pay any attention to me, right? But hear me out...I was going to buy this teddy bear ring for my girlfriend, until I found out that it was \$300. I was broke at the time, so I never ended up getting it and I know it's wrong and stupid to even ask, but if somehow it survived, could I have it?"

"*sighs* I'll see what I can do..."

"Really?" he said, the excitement showing through his eyes.

"Yeah, but no promises that I'll be able to find it and if anyone asks, I had nothing to do with it, got it?"

"Yes, sir," he said.

And so, he patiently waited until he saw the fireman return from inside.

"Well?" he asked.

"I'm afraid-"

Mike sighs

"It was right here all along," he said, pulling it out of his pocket with a smile.

"*takes it* Oh, thank you!" he said, ironically getting down on one knee, clasping his hands together, and shaking them in gratitude.

And so, he put that ring in a little red box, having his mom assist him with wrapping it of course, and put it under the tree just before El had arrived in Hawkins. It was simple, but thoughtful and he knew she would appreciate it.

El on the other hand, had had a harder time finding something to give him. She wanted it to be just right, something that he would never forget, something that honored everything he had done for her.

"What are you supposed to give guys anyway?" she had asked Max over the phone.

"That's one mystery no woman has ever been able to solve!" Max replied.

El sighs

"Don't overthink it. Just give him something that you think he would enjoy and that would make him happy. Frankly, I think anything coming from you would make him giddy as a schoolgirl."

"*laughs* Thanks, Max."

"No sweat!"

So, after a lot of thought, she was finally able to come up with something good...something meaningful- Hopper's trusty cross pen.

For someone like Mike, a pen would actually be a very practical gift, but the fact that it used to be Hopper's made it all the more special. And so, as Mike was fixing her some Christmas morning eggos, she discretely slipped the pen, encased in a box with big red bow wrapped around it, underneath the tree.

"There you are," he said, setting the plate down on the table.

"Thanks, love," she said, a smile emerging between those rosy cheeks of hers.

"No problem," he said.

After breakfast, they lied down on the couch, bundled under a warm blanket together and quietly watched some television.

"Mike, don't take this the wrong way, but why are squirming so much?"

"I don't know why, but my shoulders really hurt. It kinda feels like there's a knot in my back. I think I may have slept on it wrong or something."

"Do you want me to massage it for you?"

"Sure, if you don't mind."

"Not at all," she replied.

And so she knelt on the couch, straddling over his lower back as she positioned her hands on his shoulders and began rubbing them.

"Good?" she asked.

"A little lower."

"How 'bout now?"

"Yeah, that's it, just really dig in right there."

Mike continued to make noises both in pain and relief as she kept going. She couldn't tell whether or not it was actually helping or working, but luckily she had another thought in mind.

"Mike, I'm gonna try something different, okay? I don't know if it's gonna work, but just trust me."

"O-Okay," he said nervously, eager to know what she was gonna do to him.

And so she intertwined her hands together and turned them inside out, pushing them against the air to stretch them out. Then, she took a deep breath and centered her thoughts, once again, reaching her hands out while staring down at Mike's back with intense focus. Scrunching her fingertips towards her hands, she knew it was working, not only because that oddly satisfying feeling of blood dripping down her nose was back, but also because Mike's hyena-like noises were too.

"I can't tell...Does this feel good?"

"More than good...Great! Can you try chopping it too?"

"Like this?" she asked, her hands moving like the Karate Kid.

"Yeah, just like that!"

And by the time Mike sat up, even after El had already wiped the blood away from her nose, he had still caught onto the fact that she had used her powers. After knowing her just as El, his girlfriend and nothing more for months, seeing her with powers again felt strange and he had to get used to it all over again. He looked at her surprised, maybe even a little scared, despite feeling safe in her protection.

"What else can you do?" he asked.

pinches him, nose starts bleeding

"Ow! What was that for?"

"For being a dingus."

"Well, what else am I supposed to- Yeah...you're right. I sounded like someone who tests products out for a living."

"*laughs* Exactly!"

"I wanna try more though...I know that I can do things again that I wasn't able to before, but I still feel...different," she continued.

"Different how?"

"It's just a feeling. I can't explain it, but when I had my powers, I was very aware of the fact that I had them. I was really in touch with myself and I still don't completely feel that way."

"Well, there's only one real way to know...Are you thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Try to enter The Void and move something bigger?"

"Yeah, and if neither works yet, then we'll know...we'll know that we

still have work to do."

"And eventually we can figure out the source of my powers. Knowing that might help me channel them better."

"Precisely."

El liked to watch Mike brainstorm. Whenever a problem emerged, there was nothing that could stop him from trying to solve it. He hated sitting around when he knew he could do something. He wouldn't rest until a plan was set in place and whenever he made a plan, he stuck to it. That was what she loved about him. He was reliable.

"Which first?" he asked her.

"The Void because there's a chance that I can move big things, just not see into The Void. Hopefully, I can do both though."

"Sounds like a plan," he said.

Checkered tablecloth over her eyes, tv static in the background, Mike's hand holding hers, she attempted to enter the empty, echoey, black space, but instead, she just saw the backs of her eyelids and nothing else.

"Anything?" Mike asked, rubbing her index finger with his thumb.

"No," she said, disappointed, yanking her blindfold off.

She sat there for a minute and put her head on his shoulder, telling herself that everything would be okay.

10 minutes later, she was ready to try again:

"So, you were able to lift the mistletoe, but that's nothing compared to the cars you've flipped and thrown in the past...Maybe try lifting or dragging something a little heavier, without hurting yourself of course," said Mike.

"Like a chair?"

"Yeah, that'll work."

"How 'bout I try your dad's La-Z-Boy chair?"

"Are you sure about that? It's pretty heavy..."

"Isn't that the point?"

"I mean, I guess, but just be careful."

"Always," she said with a smile.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and opened them once again, feeling refreshed and ready to tackle the challenge before her. Then, she eyeballed the ratty old thing, going over everything Kali had taught her in her head.

Breathing heavily, grunting in frustration, with hands and fingers squirming and twitching, she was struggling. Mike hated to watch her struggle, but he admired her determination through it all.

"El, I don't think it's-"

"Mike, please! Don't," she said firmly.

And so she continued until she couldn't anymore, until her head started to feel light as a feather.

As she started falling back in exhaustion, Mike caught her, saying:

"Easy, easy. You're okay, I've got you."

And so he carried her to the couch, getting her something to drink and then sitting by her feet.

"Look, I know you feel like giving up right now, but that's not who you are. We can take a break for now, and we should, we both need it, but we're going to have to try again at some point," he said.

"*sighs* What use is it! It's never gonna work, not like it used to anyway..."

"Yes, it will! *grabs hands, moves them while speaking* We just need

to think through all of the things you were able to do before you lost your powers, that way, we can make sure we've covered all of our bases."

"That'll take forever!"

"This is gonna be harder than we thought, but that's okay, El. They're still in there, I just know it."

"*sits in lap* You're not usually one to be optimistic," she said.

"You're right, I'm not," he said, holding her.

"But I love seeing you this way!"

"Do you know why, why I am this way now?"

"*shrugs* No."

"Guess."

"Because of *me*?"

"Bingo!"

And he looked at her, her eyes, her lips, but not like that was all there was, but rather like it was merely only a fragment of his attraction to her. Yes, there was so much more to her than met the eye. He looked at her with love beyond his own lifespan, beyond his own understanding. Love so endless, so infinite, so true. Love that lived above what he even knew. Now leaning in, he gave her a kiss that grabbed her lip as it did her attention.

And she pulled away and smiled, her face suddenly turning serious as she said:

"I think I hear someone."

And sure enough, little Holly came running down the stairs, eager to open every present with her name written on the label.

"*whispers in El's ear* Remember she doesn't know about Santa, so

just play along, okay?"

"Okay," she said, kissing his cheek and wrapping her arm around his.

"Morning, Holly," said El.

"Good morning!" she said joyfully.

El nudges Mike

"*sighs* You wanna sit with us?" he asked.

"Sure," she said, breaking their embrace by sitting in between them.

"You excited?" asked Mike.

"You have no idea!" she said.

"What do you hope Santa brought you this year?" asked El.

"Holiday Barbie or...a Cabbage Patch Kid!"

"Ooh, those are good ones! I'm sure you'll get at least one thing on your list this year."

"I sure hope so!"

Mike rubs Holly's head

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

"Yes!"

"*chuckles* What do you want? Cereal?"

"Um...Yeah!"

"Okay, I'll go fix you some."

"El, can you watch her?" he continued.

"Of course! I got this," she said, kissing him.

[2 minutes later]

"I should check and see if Santa ate my cookies!" said Holly.

"I'll come with you," said El, thinking back to when she and Mike snacked on them the night before.

El wasn't crazy about deceiving Holly with this whole "Santa" business, but she knew that it was just something that practically all families who celebrated this beloved holiday did, so she went along with it, finding that for the first time, she was apart of a secret instead of having one that was being kept from her as usual. It made her feel important somehow and responsible. Maybe she was even enjoying it a little.

"He did! He ate them!"

"*gasps* With hardly any left," El added.

"I guess he liked them," she said with a giggle.

As Holly ate her cereal a thought occurred to El.

"Wanna make breakfast?"

"*laughs* We already ate, silly!" said Mike.

"No, not for us, I meant for everyone else."

"Oh. Yeah, sure. That's a great idea! Uh wha-what do you wanna make?"

"Pancakes and eggs."

"Okay. Well, lead the way, Martha Stewart!"

"Who?"

"She's a famous businesswoman who writes cookbooks and that type of thing."

"Oh," she said with a shy smile.

"You want an apron?"

"Sure."

He searched in the cupboard for his mom's apron, the one with the patchwork his grandma had sewn herself. After having found it, he slid the loop over her head and kissed her neck as he tied it in the back.

"Thank you, dear," El joked.

"Sure thing, honey," he said with a wink.

And so they fixed breakfast, side-by-side, enjoying partaking in an activity that neither of them usually had much of knack for. Everything was somehow just more fun when they did it together.

Joyce had taught El how to make eggs herself for whenever she had to go into work early and wasn't able to fix them for her, but El wasn't sure how to make pancakes, so Mike taught her.

After pouring the batter one time and flipping it once ready, he let her give it a try herself. It was one of those cliché moments where the guy stands over the girl's shoulder and guides her hand in whatever she's doing, trying to impress her while also getting closer to her. The only difference was that at this point in their relationship, El didn't need any more reason to be impressed. She was totally and completely captivated by him in a smitten kind of way. She still felt a little fluttery every time he touched her.

"There you go, you got it!"

"All thanks to you..." she said, rubbing her nose with his.

And not long after that, Nancy and her parents came trudging down the stairs with Joyce and Jonathan tagging along.

"Good morning, sweetie," Mrs. Wheeler said to Mike, kissing his forehead.

"Morning, Mom."

"What's all of this?" she asked.

"Oh, that! Um, El and I made breakfast for you guys."

"Ted, would you look at that! Blueberry pancakes, your favorite."

"Oh boy!" he said.

"El, look at you in the apron! You look so cute! Jonathan, would you get a picture of this?" asked Joyce.

"JOY-OYCE!" said El, her face red as Rudolph's nose.

"What? You do! Now stand together, you two, don't be shy."

"Alright, say Merry Christmas!" said Jonathan.

"Merry Christmas," they said in unison.

"On the bright side, at least we'll have some more pictures to hold onto when you go back to your town and I sulk here at home," said Mike, talking through his smile.

"Yeah, true. Good thing we have Jonathan to take lots."

And after a delicious breakfast, they all gathered around the tree, lights and all, but not without making a couple of Joyce jokes.

"Holly, would you like to go first, sweetheart?" asked Mrs. Wheeler.

"Yes, please, please! Can I?"

"Go for it!" said Nancy.

Yanking the bow off and unraveling the wrapping paper surrounding it, sure enough, it was the doll she had asked for.

"*squeals* It's a holiday Barbie!"

"Oh wow, I didn't see that one coming," said Mike.

El pinches with mind

Mike rubs shoulder in pain

"What are you gonna name it, Holls?" asked Nancy.

"Lucy."

"Ooh, that's a pretty name!" said Joyce.

Next was Jonathan, who got a new tripod for his camera, and then Nancy, who got a typewriter. They went around the circle until it was finally Mike's turn.

"It's just a little something, but hopefully you'll like it," said El.

"It's from you. Of course, I'll love it!"

El smiles

"A cross pen!" he said.

Eyes turning glassy, lashes wettening, Joyce put a hand to her mouth, realizing exactly who that little old pen belonged to.

"It-It used to be my dad's. He used to clip it on the pocket of his uniform before he went to work," El added.

"El, this is awfully sweet...Are you sure about this?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"I just wouldn't want to accept something this valuable unless you were totally comfortable with giving it away."

"I am, don't worry. Otherwise, I wouldn't have given it to you in the first place."

"I guess you have a point there. *pauses to examine it* Wow, I love it! Thank you," he said, giving her a hug that she needed.

"I'll take real good care of it, I promise," he said, over her shoulder as he rubbed it.

"I know you will," she said tearily, thinking of when her dad told

Mike to be careful back at the mall.

And next up was El.

"Alright, so this one's kind of small, but I have a feeling you're really gonna like it," he said.

She untied the ribbon and tore away until there was a little circle of wrapping paper scraps scattered around her.

"*squeals* Mike, it's so cute! How did you know?!"

"I just know how much you love teddy bears, but there's actually a story behind that."

"There is?"

"Well, yeah, sort of. *clears throat* You remember when Will and Lucas and I were at the mall that one day when we broke up."

"Yeah...?"

"Well, I really was looking for something to get you and when we stopped in this jewelry shop, I knew I had to get *holds up* this ring because it just had your name written all over it, but the man behind the counter said it was \$300, so I knew it was way out of my budget."

"Then how did you get it?"

"Well, at first I started saving up, but when the mall burned down, I thought I had lost my chance. Then, I decided to ask one of the firefighters to do me a solid and check and see if it was still there and if it had survived in the fire and sure enough, it did. I honestly probably shouldn't have taken it, but I couldn't help myself."

"Oh, Mike! I can't believe you went through all of that trouble...I just-I love it!"

"May I do the honors?" he asked with a goofy smile, holding it up.

"You may," she said, presenting her hand to him.

And he slid the ring on her finger, thinking about how one day he might actually get the chance to do this at the altar, with all of his friends and family watching from the pews.

"Hold on, I have one more thing for you," he said.

"Wait, what? You can't do that! I only got you one thing..."

"The hell I can!" he responded.

"LANGUAGE!" yelled Ted.

Mike rolls eyes

"It's really not much. Just wait here, I'll be right back."

"O-Okay," she said.

"Do either of you know about this?" she asked Will and Nancy.

"No," said Will.

"Nope, no clue," said Nancy.

El sighs

Coming back up from the basement, Mike quietly snuck up behind El, signaling the others by putting a finger to his lips. Then, he took a familiar quilted cloth and wrapped it around her eyes, tying it in the back.

"Mike, seriously! What's going on?"

"Just take it off and you'll see."

Despite her confusion, she did as he said, and studied the fabric closely.

"Wait, a minute...This is from-" she started.

"The fort," he finished.

"I-I don't understand though. Why-Why are you giving this to me?"

"It's to use as you continue practicing to travel into The Void again. It's not just some random bandana we find anymore, it's *yours*. It's your own blindfold, but I mean it could serve other purposes too. I just thought it might be nice to have something that reminded you of home."

"I'm speechless. This- *holds up* This is perfect, Mike! Thank you," she said, hugging him tightly.

Later that evening, they went back down to the basement and hung out with Will, who had recently taken his love of roleplaying and turned into a talent- acting. He was really into making up skits and things and would perform them for Mike and El, much to their enjoyment. Sometimes, they would even take a Magna Doodle and rank his skits 1 out of 11.

After the last one however, El laughed so hard, she practically fell into Mike's lap.

"*wheezes* That was great!" she said.

"That was more than great- That was...hysterical!" he said.

"MICHAEL, DINNER'S READY!" Mrs. Wheeler yelled.

"COMING!" he yelled back, in the most Mike Wheeler way possible.

"I don't wanna move, I'm too lazyyyyyyy!" said El.

"*says seriously* Then don't..."

blushes, grabs the Magna Doodle

Then, she stared down until the little pen floated from the side of her leg and began tracing on the board all by itself, but not tracing just anything...

"I...Love...You," he read as each word appeared.

"Aww, I love you too," he said, rubbing the blood away from her nose.

El smiles, snuggles close

7. Love At First Lab Rat

Hi, guys! Oh my gosh, I am SO sorry how long this has taken me to write, but this one's a big ol' chapter, so hopefully, that'll make up for it. I don't believe all of you are aware that I published another story at the beginning of this month, although I got some really great feedback from one of you that really made my day, so thank you for that. Anyway, but that story that I published took me about a month to write because it was dedicated to one of my best friends as a belated birthday present and then I've also been SUPER SUPER busy with school. Senior year is tough, but I'm managing the best that I can. From here on out, you can probably expect a chapter every 1-2 weeks because of how busy my schedule is. Thank you for your patience and support. Love you all as much as I loved writing this! ~Kate

REEEE, REEEE, REEEE! That was the obnoxiously shrill chirp of Mike Wheeler's alarm clock going off bright and early one Monday morning, not be mistaken with the sound played in a horror movie when a guy comes behind someone with a knife...although it sure felt like it!

Rolling over, he groaned in annoyance as he was having difficulty shutting it off. It was brand new, this being the first time that he had ever used it. He usually relied on his mom to wake him up with a flick of the light switch, a warm good morning, and a bright smile across her face, but now that he was in high school, Mrs. Wheeler thought it would be best that he start relying on himself to get up on time. As the clock continued to make a cacophony of deafening noise, he repeatedly pressed the snooze button, hitting it harder each time-News Flash: didn't work.

At some point or another, he just decided to give up and yanked the plug out of the wall. It's funny, he was determined enough to try and reach El for 353 days, not giving up on her once, even when there was no sign that she was still around or anywhere to be found, yet he didn't have enough patience in him to fool with this alarm clock for any longer than 2 minutes.

Even after he had already opened them, the cave-shaped curtains that were his eyelids slowly drooped back down and closed in around his eyeballs, enveloping them. He put his hands over his face, wanting nothing more than to fall back asleep and stay in bed all day, but instead, letting out a sigh, he reached over to his lamp and twisted it until it lit up. It was so intense and intrusive that it nearly blinded him, his eyes stinging as if he had just gone swimming without goggles, the chlorine irritating his eyes. Rubbing them, he threw the covers off of his body and headed downstairs for breakfast.

For Mike, Mondays were always a struggle. He used to love school, it used to be his favorite part of the day, but high school was different...Everything he ever thought he knew about school was raised to higher stakes. Somehow, middle school lacked this whole social hierarchy that lived among senior high, or it was much different and insignificant at least. Now, he had cliques to worry about. He had more homework than time to do it in and teachers that didn't give a damn. Above all else, he so missed Mr. Clarke. Most of his new teachers were either boring or mean. Sure, some of them were funny and nice, but where was the enthusiasm in teaching that Mr. Clarke always seemed to have?

"Good morning, Michael," said Mrs. Wheeler.

"Morning, Mom," he said, kissing the top of her head from behind.

"I made you eggs and bacon. I hope that's alright..."

"Looks great," he said, covering up the bitter taste in his mouth with a reassuring smile.

"Well, don't just stand there! Go ahead! Take as much as you'd like."

"Why are you being so chipper? It's annoying."

"Can't a mother just love her son in peace?!"

"I guess so..."

"Sleep well?" she asked just as he sat down at the table.

"Could've been better...and longer."

"Well, that explains why you're such a grumpy pants!"

glares

"With that attitude, next time, I'll let you make your own breakfast!" she griped.

rolls eyes

It was Mike's first day back since holiday break and already, there was a biology lab there waiting for him. A part of him didn't mind though, as he had always wanted to dissect a frog. But then the unthinkable happened, the worst and least ideal situation possible- Max was assigned to be his new lab partner. Before he knew it, it was too late...

Plopping in the stool beside him, she said:

"Well, this should be fun...right?! 'Cause god knows we get along SOOO well!"

"*sighs* Let's just get this over with before one of us kills each other," said Mike.

"I second that!" she said.

Halfway through the lab, Mike spaced out, daydreaming about El and the wonderful weekend they spent together.

"Mike," said Max. "Mike! *waves hand in front of face* "Hello?! Earth to Mike! *sighs, then tries again* HEY, Frogface!"

snaps out of it and glares in her direction

"Geez, who peed in *your* cornflakes?"

"Back off, Max, I'm not in the mood..."

"Aww, how come, Wheeler? Has the holiday spirit left your sorry ass already?"

"Has Lucas dumped your sorry ass already?!"

imaginary crickets chirping

"Sorry, I don't know where that came from. That was a little harsh..." he said.

"A *little*?" she repeated.

shrugs

"No, it's okay. I admire your courage...especially since El dumped your sorry ass!"

"THAT WAS ONE TIME AND IT WAS *YOUR* FAULT!"

"*My* fault?! You're the one who lied to her!"

"Yeah, because I had to, not because I wanted to...She never would've done it in the first place if it wasn't for you!"

"Why are you pinning this all on *me*?"

"YOU'RE THE ONE WHO GAVE HER THE IDEA!"

"*comes up from behind and clears throat* Do I need to separate you two?" asked the teacher.

"No, no sir. Sorry..." said Mike.

"Don't make me ask again..."

Mike gulps

"I thought we were over that...Why were we even fighting about that in the first place?" asked Max.

"Beats me!" said Mike.

"It was still bound to happen anyway though, the breakup. You know, just because you and El are like the perfect couple or whatever doesn't mean that you're not still *just* like the rest of us..."

"*sighs* Just pass the scissors, will ya?" he said.

"Wait, how come you get to make the first cut?" asked Max.

"Because I'm the paladin."

"Oh, not this party politics shit again..."

"You know what? You wanna make a big deal out of it, then be my guest!"

"Gladly," she said, her face lighting up.

"Can I at least see the forceps?" he asked.

"Forceps? What the hell are forceps?" she asked, completely puzzled.

"*sighs with disappointment* The-The little tweezer things..."

"Oh! Well, why didn't you just say so?!"

Just as she started to make the first cut, something unexpected happened- the frog came alive! Slippery as lathered soap, it escaped from her hands, hopping around the classroom in a ribbiting frenzy.

"Nice going, Butterfingers! First, Dart, now this!" Mike huffed.

"Oh, would you just put a sock in it already?!"

"That's it- DETENTION! Both of you!" said the teacher.

"For what?" Mike asked.

"Screwing around instead of doing your lab and losing the frog!"

"What? That's crazy! How was I supposed to know it would come alive?" asked Max.

"Not my problem," said the teacher.

"Greeaat..." said Mike.

Later that day, in detention...

"Mr. Moore is out to get me..." said Mike.

"Oh, he is not out to get you! You think *everyone's* conspiring against you..."

"Because they are!"

"You're just making a big deal out of nothing! He's like this with everyone..."

"Yeah..."

"Have you ever noticed the way that vein on his forehead pops out whenever he yells?" she asked.

"*speaks through laughter* Ye-heh-hesss! I thought I was the only one! It's almost like it has a consciousness. Like there's this blue bulging worm underneath his skin."

"*laughs* Exactly!" said Max.

"God, he's evil..."

"What a prick!" Max muttered to herself.

"I'm glad we finally agree!"

"*chuckles* Yeah."

"Truce? *extends hand*" asked Mike.

"*hesitates, sighs, then shakes hand* Truce," she repeated.

And from that moment forward, or at least for a while, Mike and Max were buds. Something happened between them that day, an unlikely friendship sparked between the two that wasn't there before and it was all thanks to Mr. Moore! Who knew that bonding over the hatred of a mean teacher was an actual thing!

It wasn't all laughs and giggles though...not for El at least. She found that Mike was spending more time with Max and less with her and the same went for Max. One day, when they were in the same place again, she finally confronted him about it:

"Mike?"

"Yeah?"

"Can we talk for a sec?"

"Sure," he said, smiling and rubbing her hip with his thumb as he put his arm around her waist and walked to her room with her.

"What's up?" he asked, sitting down and putting his hand in her lap.

"I'm a little bothered by how much time you and Max are spending together..."

"But isn't that what you wanted, for us to get along better?"

"Well, yes, but *sighs* Mike, you know how much I love you and Max and I'm thrilled that you guys are friends now, but lately, *sighs* you've been kind of distant because you've been hanging out with her more than me and I don't want to be that jealous girlfriend, but I just *sighs* I don't know, I miss you..."

"You know what, you're right...I have been spending a lot of time with her lately and I know that must be hard for you to understand because usually, we're always at each other's throats. I guess it's just that *pauses* we've been frenemies for the longest time and now that we're finally getting along and she doesn't live in another town, I'm spending more time with her without considering how it's cutting into my time with you. *leans closer to face, speaks softly while looking down* For what it's worth, I'm really sorry and if it makes any difference, even when I'm hanging out with Max, I'm thinking about you *looks into eyes, pokes chest lightly* the whole time. And I'm not just saying that either! She always catches me daydreaming...You're the reason why."

"It's okay, Mike, I understand. And I trust you, sometimes even more than I do myself. I know you'd never hurt me, not on purpose at least. I'm just sorry...I feel like I'm always coming to you with a new problem or because I'm paranoid that something's getting in the way of our relationship. I don't want it to seem like I don't trust you though because I do, I so do, I just have trust issues, even when it

comes to the people I trust most."

"That's perfectly okay, El. I mean, I am too! I'm always worried that some guy's gonna come along and take you away from me, but relationships don't come without their fears and doubts. Guys, you know, we want you to tell us how you feel, we want you to spell it out for us, not just expect for us to read your mind and automatically know what you're thinking."

"I didn't know that, but I'm glad I do now. And Mike, you have nothing to worry about! I'm not going anywhere anytime soon. No guy could take me away from you. You're the only person I want to be with. You always have been," she said, clutching his hair through her fingers, leaning in, and kissing him like she meant it.

"*pulls away, sighs* Look, this was never meant to be easy, navigating a long-distance relationship. That's why communication isn't only important in a relationship in general, but especially now, both phone calls and expressing our feelings with each other," she continued.

"When did you get so wise? Sounds like you and Ms. Byers have been getting along pretty well."

"What are you talking about! I've always been this way," she joked. "And how do you mean?"

"Can't argue with that. *chuckles, sighs* I just meant that *pauses* when Hopper was getting so annoyed by how much time we were spending together and wanted to have a talk with us, Joyce was always getting on him about having a heart-to-heart with us, you know to create an environment where we-

"All feel comfortable, trusted, and open to sharing our feelings. Right, right..." she nodded with a smile.

Mike raised his eyebrows, recognizing those very words he once read and realizing that she knew it by heart. She had read that letter over and over, memorizing it without even intending to. She knew it inside out and upside down, like the back of her hand. She still had nearly all of Hopper's stuff, but nothing made her feel closer to him

than that letter. That letter was vulnerable and as genuine as you can get. That letter was him. Every sentence, every word, every letter on that page, an extension of his mind, his thoughts, his beliefs, his hopes- his feelings. His soul, his love for El- all of it lived on through that letter, clinging onto her for dear life. That letter taught her so many important life lessons that she carried with her every day since his demise. She found herself always coming back to it whenever she needed a little guidance that was beyond Joyce's help.

For anyone other than her, it had no real value, but to El, it was so personal in a way like nothing else she owned. She had let Joyce read it, knowing how much she cared for him and particularly because the first part was inspired by her discussion with him. She was very understanding about it, not wanting to put any pressure on El to let her read it and leaving it up to her to decide whether or not she got to. The way El saw it, she already knew about the letter, so what was the harm in sharing it with her. If anything it'd only bring them closer, bonding over the man that they had both gotten to know so well.

She had talked about it before with Max, as it often came up into conversation whenever they openly talked about their grief with her dad and Max's brother, but she had never actually seen it. Other than Joyce, Mike was the only other person who had ever read it, let alone laid eyes on it. Mike was El's safety, her rock. He understood her better than anyone else. He was always there for her, no matter what. He took care of her and believed in her when no one else did. He was the love of her life, the most important person to her in all of the world.

"But my point was that that sounds like Ms. Byers talking and I could only assume that would be because you guys have been spending more time together, but honestly, I'd trust her relationship advice more than I would Hopper's any day!" said Mike.

"You'd think I'd take offense to that, since he was pretty much the closest thing I ever had to real dad and stable family, but honestly, I would do the same. *laughs*"

"Anyway, El, you and Max and I, we're going to figure this thing out. We'll find a way where we can all get time with each other, together

and separately."

"Yeah, I-I'd like that," she said softly, smiling at the ground and then looking up at him, longing for another taste of those lips.

"Hey, so now that we're together, do you wanna continue looking at those Hawkins Lab files we pulled out on New Year's?" he asked.

"Sure."

"Okay, so where should we start?"

"Let's start with Mama's files."

"Okay."

Sorting through them, he said:

"So, I know you've told me this before, but can we go over what your mom showed you in The Void, just in case it'll help us connect some more dots?"

nods

She sat down criss-cross applesauce. She then began to recount how it all started, with her hands in her lap, touching at the fingertips, and her eyes on Wheeler, looking at him directly to make sure that she didn't leave anything important out.

"When I was first born, Papa obviously took me away. Mama came looking for me a few years after that and made it far enough where she actually see me, but then the guards found her and separated us again. And then they stripped her down and put her in a hospital gown, strapping her down to the table and *welts up a little* they-they shocked her, Mike...OVER and OVER again. *sniffles* It was torture! *catches breath* They kept raising the frequencies and eventually it just left her in this vegetable state that she is in now."

And he sat there and rubbed her back for a minute, not wanting to pepper her with too many questions at once when she was clearly still sorting through the files that were feelings, both literally and figuratively.

"I'm sorry, I know this is a sensitive topic for you, so I'm trying to be conscious of that, but when you say they 'shocked' her, do you mean like electrical shocks? Like they hooked her up to some machine or something?"

"Yes, someone put these two connectors on the sides of her head and held them there while Papa ordered the man that Kali and I hunted down to turn the dial to 450 on the machine."

"Jesus, that sounds like electroconvulsive therapy...only, it was used as a form of torture on a perfectly healthy person and not to relieve someone with a mental disorder of seizures."

"I'm just gonna pretend like I know what all of that meant."

laughs

"*laughter fades, face turns serious, grabs ahold of shoulder* Hey, they didn't ever do anything like that to you, did they?" he asked, concerned, looking at her fondly and with such endearment as he tucked a piece of hair behind her ear.

"No, not exactly. I think they tazed Kali sometimes as punishment...Usually, they just made me test out my powers and locked me away in an empty cell if I disobeyed them, but sometimes much worse."

"Mmm," he said, like you do when you hear about something disturbing in the news.

"El?" he continued.

"Yeah?"

"I know you go through this every day, reliving these terrible memories and everything, and would probably rather drop it altogether than continue talking about it, but I'm just so so sorry that all of this happened to you and I feel like I don't tell you that nearly enough."

"I know you are. *holds hand* But I mean, it's not like either of us could've done anything about it."

"I guess that's true, but still I just, I love you so much and I hate that you had to go through all of that..."

"Yeah, but the way I see it, if it weren't for my past, I never would've ended up where I did and I never would've met you! That has to be worse than the suffering I've been through...I can't even imagine living in a world without knowing what a wonderful human being Mike Wheeler is! All I know is...that's not a world I would want to be apart of."

"I love you SO much..."

"I love you more..."

"Not possible."

"Yes possible."

"Agree to disagree?"

"*eyebrows dance* Halfway happy," she added, with a goofy smile.

[Moments later]

"Wait, I see something..." he said.

"What? What is it?"

"MKUltra."

"What's that?"

"It sounds like it was some study conducted by the CIA where they tested drugs' effects on people, specifically LSDs."

"What are LSDs?"

"Oh, they're like psychedelic drugs, so they create these euphoric experiences and make you see things that aren't actually there, you know like hallucinations and stuff."

"Well, what does that have to do with Mama?"

"I-I think she was in it. Here, see for yourself. There's a newspaper article about it. *hands article*"

As she examined it carefully, he turned to her and said:

"You see who was leading the study?"

"Papa...*smacks lips in discontent* I should've known," she said.
"What was the purpose of the study anyway?"

"Well, it sounds like the project was active up until the '70s, but it started 20 years prior, so if the CIA was involved, I can only assume that it would have something to do with the Cold War."

"The Cold War?"

"Yeah, you know this fight we've been having with the Commies and stuff?"

"You mean like how the Russians built that base in our mall and everything?"

"Yeah, that's part of it. Our government made it a priority to have the upper hand in this war, and we've been trying to make these scientific advancements to guarantee us an advantage. Some of them we made just for the purpose of making them, but a lot of that technology was designed for the purpose of fighting, so weapons and other forms of ammunition and defense. There's bound to be a document to back it up somewhere around here...We just have to find it."

"Would *this* help confirm anything?" asked El.

"*mumbles while skimming through* Let's see, 'with the goal of developing'...'used against ENEMIES DURING THE COLD WAR'. That's it! I was right! I knew those Commie bastards were connected to all of this somehow," he said, the excitement becoming more apparent in his voice as he found the answers he was looking for.

"These-These drugs, if the scientists involved were trying to develop weapons to use against enemies during the Cold War, then what were they testing drugs out for exactly?"

"Well, according to what I just read, it sounds like they were trying to develop mind-control techniques to spy on the Commies and have influence over them."

"Wait, Mike, is it cold in Russia?"

"Yeah, why?"

"I just realized something..."

"What is it?"

"Back in the lab, there was this one time when Papa showed me this picture of a man and asked me to find him in The Void and now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure he was Russian."

"What makes you think that?"

"When I found him, he was standing, wearing a thick, green, fur coat and this almost square-shaped fur hat on the top of his head. His arms were crossed and he started mumbling, but I didn't understand a word he said because he wasn't speaking any English. All I know is, if Papa's behind all of this, then-"

"It can't be a coincidence," he finished.

"It sure doesn't seem like it."

"They have to be connected somehow, the two studies."

"But how?"

"Well, let's see...About how old do you think your mom is?"

"Gosh, I don't know...Probably in her 30's at least."

"So, *pauses to think* she was probably still in college around the time she participated in the study."

"*does the math herself* Yeah, that sounds about right."

"Well, according to this medical record, it says your mom had a miscarriage and there aren't any copies of your birth certificate in

here or even your own file at the lab!"

"So, what are you saying?"

"I'm saying that I think your mom was pregnant with you while she was still in the study. I'm saying, I think that they covered up your birth altogether to make all of your mom's claims about Papa kidnapping you appear to be false."

"I think you're onto something...I mean, how else would he have known about me and my powers in the first place?"

"Exactly."

"Okay, but Mike, all we've done today is figure out what happened to Mama. We're still not any step closer to figuring out how my powers came to be."

"Unless..."

"Oh, what is it now?" she said, slightly annoyed by his never-ending theories.

thinks to self, but no answer

"Unless what?"

"That's just it!" he said.

"Mike, seriously! What the hell are you talking about?"

"When a woman's pregnant with a child, there are all kinds of things she's supposed to avoid and behaviors she's told not to engage in because there are so many factors that can impede a baby's development. For instance, they're advised not to smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, or in this case DO DRUGS...Are you picking up what I'm putting down?"

"Yeah!" she said confidently. "No...Sorry, still not getting it."

chuckles

"Why are you laughing?" she asked.

"*chortles* You're just so cute..." he said, with smiling eyes.

"*speaks through laughter* Shut uh-huh-hup!" she said, in a cute, pouty way.

"*smiles* Well, anyway, I was just implying that-"

"Wait, wait! I wanna get this right...*clears throat* Were you suggesting that her having used LSDs during all of the nine months she was pregnant with me explain how I was born with special abilities?" she asked, completely catching him off guard.

"Yes!" he said in a slightly surprised tone.

"But using drugs while pregnant doesn't usually cause powers to form, does it? I've never heard of that happening to anyone else. I mean, everybody wants them, but they're considered extremely rare and impossible even, so how would that be possible?"

"No, typically, drug use would just lead to mental disorders, deformities, and other types of disabilities and birth defects, but LSDs are really strong drugs...There's no telling what it could do to a pregnancy, but my instincts tell me that your powers were the result of a mutation caused by them."

"A mutation?"

"Yeah, it's like when something changes the structure of a gene. It could be anything from the elimination, addition, or rearrangement of larger sections of genes or chromosomes."

"So, you're thinking that the drugs they had her use somehow altered my genetic code?"

"Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying."

"You're a genius..."

"*I'm* the genius?! We never would've figured this out if it wasn't for you!"

"What the hell are you talking about? I barely did anything."

"That's not true, El. You provided all of the information, I just made some sense of it. We don't even know if I'm right! It's just a theory."

"Oh, but it will be! It's a damn good one, Wheeler. You should be proud of yourself!" she said, kissing his cheek.

"Thanks," he said, all blushy.

"You know, we could always call Aunt Becky to confirm our suspicions..."

"See what I mean! I'm sitting here like an idiot, trying to come up with this elaborate conspiracy theory to explain everything, meanwhile, here you are, realizing that there was a much simpler solution right in front of me the whole time. I'm no more of a genius than you are, El Byers."

She shook her head with a smile that rested just between her rosy cheeks, showing him just how much his words affected her.

"Just pass me the phone book, Wheeler."

"Right...Sorry!" he said, rummaging for it in the kitchen drawers.

dials number

"*picks up* Hello?" she responded.

"Hey, Aunt Becky, Jane here."

"Hey..." she said awkwardly, not expecting her call.

"Look, I know we haven't really talked much after everything that happened, but I want that to change because I really do care about you and I think about you all the time. You're probably still pretty angry with me for taking cash from you and running away, so I understand if you don't want to talk to me, but I just wanted to say that I'm really sorry. It's just- when I overheard you on the phone with social services, I got scared that the bad men were secretly behind all of it and that they might take me away again. Anyway, I know I probably don't deserve a second chance, but if you could find

it in your heart to forgive me, I would really love it if we could talk more regularly and get to know each other better. I'd love to come visit you every now and then too because you're some of the only *real* family I have left..."

"Jane, I'm not mad. I understand that your situation has never been easy and frankly, I probably would've done the same thing if I was in your shoes. Even though we only met once, I really enjoyed our time together. I could use your company. It gets pretty lonely around here sometimes because, well, you know. You've seen her...but yeah, I'd really like that. I've missed you..."

"*cracks a smile* I've missed you too!"

brief silence

"Hey, I uh, heard about your old man...I'm awfully sorry," Becky said.

"It-It's okay. I actually moved and now I'm living with Joyce, you know, the woman who went with Hop to see you and Mama a few years back?"

"So I hear!" she said. "How is that going?"

"It's going really well! Joyce is a really great mom to me...She genuinely cares about my well-being and will stop at nothing to make sure that I'm safe. She reminds me a lot of Hop in that way...and Mama too if I'm being honest, like how she fought for me in court and tried to rescue me from the lab."

"Yeah, she seemed really nurturing in that way. A little squirrely though too-"

"*laughs* Well, that's Joyce for you!" said El.

"But she always had good intentions, and I could tell that even though she had mainly looked into this with Hopper in hopes of finding her son, that a part of her really cared about you too and was really feeling for you and all you had been through," she continued.

"Yeah. I'm really so lucky to have her, but speaking of mothers, I had a couple of questions that I wanted to ask you about Mama. That's

actually why I called, but I've been meaning to for a while now anyway."

"Alright, what do you wanna know?"

"Okay, so here's the deal: I recently somehow lost my powers and we're not sure why that is, but now they're slowly coming back. My boyfriend, Mike and I have been trying to figure out how I and all of the other patients in Hawkins Lab gained our powers in the first place, so we've been sorting through all of these files from the lab and about Mama, trying to make sense of it all and we've come up with a theory, but you probably know more about it than we do, so we wanted to fact check it."

"How old did you say you were again?" she asked jokingly.

"*laughs* C'mon, help a niece out here!"

"Alright, give it to me," she said.

"It's a little complicated, so I'm gonna let Mike explain it to you if that's alright."

"Yeah, sure, whatever's fine."

"Okay, here he is," she said, putting the phone to the edge of his cheek.

"Hi, Aunt Becky! It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise," she said.

"Okay, so tell me if I'm getting this right: Terry was an active participant in Project MKUltra, correct?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And about how old was she then?"

"20."

"Okay, and what about when she was pregnant with El? *pauses, then

blurts out* Sorry, I mean Jane!"

"Same age."

"Thanks!"

"Well," she said.

"Well what?" he asked.

"Aren't you going to tell me the theory?"

"Oh, yeah, right...Well, I was thinking, if Terry was pregnant with El while she was still being experimented on, then that could only mean that the LSDs must've done something to the fetus, hence, the reason El has powers."

"Who's this *El* you talk about?"

"Oh shit, I did it again! Sorry, excuse my language, but El and Jane are the same people. El's just a nickname I gave her and she's started going by that. It's short for Eleven."

"Oh, I see."

"It was her number back in the lab," he added.

"No need to explain it, kid, I got it."

"*speaks through nervous laughter* S-Sorry!"

"*laughs* No worries. *pauses* So, back to your theory, I don't know as much about that as I do about what they did to Terry, but it's my understanding that that's what happened. It's the only thing that makes the least bit of sense anyway..."

"I thought so too. Well, thanks! You've been such a big help."

"Ah, it's nothing," she said.

"Well, I'm gonna let El take over, but it was nice talking to you and I hope I'll get to *actually* meet you at some point."

"Right back atcha," she said.

Handing the phone back to El, she and Aunt Becky gabbed some more before finally hanging up. Toward the end of their conversation, El asked:

"How did you know all of that...what you said earlier, about Hop and Joyce and all?"

"Well, back when Joyce first visited me, I gave her my number so she could call me in case she and Jim ended up finding you. So when your father died, she called me almost immediately after it happened since I was your nearest relative. She asked me if I felt comfortable with becoming your guardian and raising you, but offered to do it herself if I said no. I ended up deciding against it, but I want you to know that it's not because I don't love you, Jane, because I do. I just was afraid that I wouldn't be good enough for you. I was never cut out to be a parent and I knew that you would be better off with her than me. Besides, I had your mother to take care of and I don't think I would've been able to support the both of you financially. So, anyway, that's how I knew about your dad and Joyce."

Face turning red, her lip quivered a little bit as she shed a tear. She wasn't mad at Aunt Becky, not in the slightest! She just couldn't help but imagine what could've been and just the thought of how much her aunt must sacrifice to take care of her mom was just so endearing and hard for her to believe.

Seeing this, Mike mouthed to her:

"*turns her by the shoulder* What's wrong? Are you okay?"

She swatted away at him in the air with her hand, shushing him, and then mouthing:

"Yes, I'm fine. I'll explain later."

"I hope I didn't hurt your feelings...I told you I wasn't good at this stuff," said Aunt Becky.

"*sniffles* No, no, it's not you, Aunt Becky. I completely understand. I mean, would I have loved to live with you and Mama? Absolutely,

but it was probably for the best. I think living with my mother when she can't be my mother anymore would've been too painful anyway...It would almost be like I was taking care of her instead of her of me. But as far as the family stuff goes, you're much better at it than you know."

"Thanks, sweetie. I appreciate that."

"What about the move though?"

"The move?"

"Yeah, you knew that I had moved away, but it was 3 months before Joyce decided to do that..."

"Ever since she told me about your dad, I started to realize how absent I had been in your life, so I call her every now and then to check-in and make sure you're doing okay and that's how she told me. I would've called you, but I just didn't want you to feel like I was getting in your business."

"I would've understood, but *sniffles, wipes tears* that's so sweet of you! You literally have no idea how much that means to me..."

"Well, it's the least I could do for my one and only niece."

"I love you, Aunt Becky."

"I love you too...*El*."

"*cracks a smile* We'll talk soon?" El asked.

"I'm counting on it," said Becky.

"Alright, bye for now."

"Bye. Good luck getting your powers back!"

"Thanks."

hangs up

Mike was more than thrilled to see El reconnecting with her family,

but being as bored out of his mind as he was, it was no secret that he was slightly annoyed by and envious of how long she had been spending on the phone and not with him. So, he let out a sigh of relief, thinking to himself, *Finally!* Even so, he still never got tired of the way El's face would light up throughout the entire phone conversation.

"Well, what do you know! You were right all along, Mr. Know-It-All!" she teased in a complementary way.

"*What did you just call me?*"

"You heard me!"

"I am *not* a know-it-all..."

"Mmm...Yeah, you are!" she said in an animated, ascending tone.

"*Mmm...*No I'm not!" he said in a similar, but mocking tone.

"Are too!"

"*giggles through his speech* Shut *uh*-up!"

"Make me!" she said in an alluring manner that could steer him away from any moment of weakness, and yet somehow, make him weak in the knees at the same time.

The on-going tension between the two filled the room with unpredictability, but Mike silenced it all at lips' touch. It was the kind of kiss that felt a bit rushed, a little impulsive even, but found its purpose in her company. He was quick to start but not to finish, lingering over the moment just as his thumb did with a stroke of her cheek. It was inflamed with passion, leaving El with a hankering for affection all-the-more.

As his face drew away from hers, she opened her eyes, looking a bit disoriented with her hands remaining in the air as if his face was still among them. She found her way again in his eyes, but halted at his lips. Letting out a yearning sigh, she sprung forward, smothering him in a kiss.

Melting at the hands of her touch, he slunk down, his feet swimming around in the soles of his shoes as his toes uncurled in comfort. With his nose nuzzled next to hers, you could hear it audibly, his breathing in and against her skin.

Physical contact was the one thing a phone conversation was never able to bring them, so they always cherished any alone time they could get. Now, with every moment they spent together, they found themselves falling back into that old honeymoon phase that they so terribly missed. Sure, the number of dates they went on these days was limited, but when it came to kissing, one thing was for sure- time was of the essence and the more they sunk into it, the more they lost themselves in it.

"Well, that was uh- *scratches head*"

"Amazing?" she asked.

"Yeah, you could say that again."

"Amazing," she repeated for effect.

He looked at her ridiculously at first. And then he broke out into an eye-closed smile, giving her shoulder a playful nudge.

"Well, I say we call it a day! We have a long way to go, we still have to figure out how you lost your powers, but that can wait," he said.

"Yeah, we've made a lot of progress today...But did we seriously just spend over 3 hours sorting through these files and drawing conclusions about how I got my powers, only to find that Aunt Becky basically knew the answer all along?"

"I'm *afraid* so," he said with a funny look on his face.

And they both broke out in laughter, losing their balance, and rolling on top of all of the documents that were spread out on the floor.

"*turns to her* But you know what?" he continued.

"What?"

"It was totally worth it because it gave us one very good reason to spend time together..."

"Oh, I can think of another..." she said, alluringly, her face close to his.

"El, my lips are going to fall off if we keep going down this road!" he joked.

"*giggles* Sorry, can't help it! You're just too kissable..." she said, covering his face in loving little pecks.

"*blushes, smiles, gasps* Oh shit! I think when we rolled around, we mixed up a bunch of the files! Now they're scattered everywhere..." said Mike.

"Shit, shit, shit! Hold that thought," she said putting a finger to his lips.

"Here, let me help. It'll make things go faster."

And after finally reorganizing it all, they said their goodbyes, which were always the hardest part about their relationship. They then parted, as they usually did. However, separated by miles, they were ever so pleased with their ability to continue this relationship, *despite* the distance.

8. Bad News When You See That Bloody Nose

Author's Note: Hey guys! Sorry for the long wait. I've had so many tests lately, have been applying to colleges, and have had two chorus concerts with dress rehearsals included. It's been super hectic, but I appreciate your patience! So, this is going to be the longest A/N ever, but the first thing I want to say is that there are two songs I really wanted to include in here by The Cure that really apply to Mileven, but unfortunately they both came out a few years after 1986, which is the year we're at at this point in the story, so let's just pretend like they were released around then if you don't mind. Everything else I've written I have fact-checked to be historically accurate, but both of these songs scream Mileven, so what are you gonna do! Also, one of my readers asked that I add some more Lumax to the book and so going through with that request, there's actually a Lumax plot that I've been wanting to write about for a while now, something that's been in the back of my head and that's a very real struggle- racism. Problems like racism and homophobia were still very much an issue back in the '80s. Gay people couldn't even come out back then and racism obviously continued and still continues to be a problem. So, with that, I just wanted to give you a heads up that the beginning of this chapter is going to be a little intense and racially sensitive because being an interracial couple was very taboo at the time and in many instances, still can be unfortunately, but I think it's important to recognize that and I just really want to see the lovable, fierce Max Mayfield stand up for Lucas, you know? That's what we were missing this season. Some real, raw Lumax moments. So, without further ado, here's the new chapter! (P.S. It's still mainly about Mileven, but Lumax will be a big focus of this chapter)

Walking into his room, Lucas found Max there, waiting for him on his bed.

"Hey, Stalker," she said flirtatiously.

"*smiles* Max! Just the girl I was wanting to see..."

"Aww, what gave me away? My red hair?"

"*slides beside* Well, that, *strokes hair* but also your West Coast, blue eyes, adorable smile, and those irresistibly pokable freckles," he said, nudging each and every one of them until he'd annoyed her just enough.

She couldn't help but laugh, and much like Hopper's face at the sight of Mike in El's room, hers turned as red a tomato. It was the curse of a fair-skinned redhead like herself.

As she sat there, with her ankles cupped in the palms of her hands and her shin resting against his thigh, he threw his arm around her shoulder, not taking his eyes off of her for even a second.

"Oh, and um, those too," he said, motioning towards her lips with his eyes and another thing in mind.

Her eyelashes fanned out, the tips of them pointing toward his eyes and lips accordingly with the shifting of her focus. Seeing as that he was already staring at hers like they were the objects of his affection, she began to follow his lead.

"Oh, I see where you're going with this," she said, playing along in an enticing whisper that faded once their faces neared.

She leaned in, with her bent knee against his abdomen, her face now turning parallel to his shoulder. Plump and smooth, he laid his lips upon hers with gentle intention. And her head twisted and winded as the left side of her face moved to that of his, their lips ending at a different locus than where they first joined.

Lucas was someone who was very sure of himself. He was humble about most things, except when it came to proving his point and his logic. That's where he drew the line, where he had to fend for himself, much like Max in that way, and despite society casting him aside most of his life, he had found his people, people that would never judge him- his core friend group. And Max, well, Max was the person he shared everything with. She was cool, laid back, and didn't care what anybody else thought. She was just always herself, even when it got her into trouble and he couldn't help but like that about

her.

Max was a feminist to the core. She didn't let other people push her around and liked to feel like she was in control. When it came to relationships, she found that she often liked to take the lead, but at the same time, she didn't want to date some wimp. She wanted someone who knew what they wanted and wasn't afraid to put themselves out there, yet was still at a loss for words when it came to the big steps in their relationship. That was when she helped fill in the gaps, but there was another part of Max that was a little shy, and every now and then, when she would least expect it, Lucas would sweep her off of her feet. She would put him in his place though, of course. She was really good at that because she didn't want to be someone's pet, she didn't want them to be tied down to each other. She just wanted something fun, something light and casual that became familiar with time and who better than with the boy that had been pining for her ever since she moved to town. In Lucas, she found someone with whom she could go on adventures with, and yet, have just as much fun spending the night in.

Kissing Lucas was like when you wander around the block, driving without a clear destination in mind, whereas kissing Max was the revving of the engine when you go for a wild ride. Though their kiss only brief, their lips moved with such ease and sense of direction for something so spur-of-the-moment, or shall we say "impetuous." However, once they let go, the edge of their lips still touched, unintentionally exhaling as they savored the moment, secretly wanting more.

With Max still leaning into the right side of his chest, Lucas then reached over to his stereo and popped in a cassette with "Diamond Dogs" on the label.

[Rebel Rebel plays in the background]

"*pulls away* Whuh- *laughs* What is *this*?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

"You like Bowie, right?"

"Yeah, but since when do you listen to him?" she asked, turning her

body toward him, interested in what he had to say.

"Since you," he said, rubbing her arm.

"Mm, *kisses* good answer," she said, returning to his lips once again.

[A minute or two later...]

"Lucas-" she said, muffled by his lips.

"Yeah?" he replied, pulling away.

"Can I ask you something?"

"Yeah, what's up?"

"Do you ever...I don't know...miss going out like we used to?"

"Yeah, sure I do."

"*sits up straighter, her back against the headboard* I feel like we're always too busy breaking up and getting back together to actually go on a proper date."

"And whose fault is that?" he asked, crossing his arms and noticeably tilting his head for effect.

"*snickers* Okay, fair enough."

"What are you doing this Saturday?" he asked.

"Nothing. It's pretty quiet now that Billy's not around blasting heavy metal throughout the whole house. Why? What'd you have in mind?" she asked with a slight smile.

"I'm taking you out. I'll pick you up, 6:30."

"And do what? There's nothing to do in this hick town."

"Oh, but you're so wrong...There's plenty to do!"

"*Like?*"

"Like..."

She crossed her arms in boredom, waiting for whatever amusing ideas he would come up with, if any!

"Well...I'm waiting!" she said.

"Oh, ye of little faith! *pauses more to think* Well, you could teach me some tricks on your skateboard like you've always wanted to do or we could just walk around a little and then maybe stop by the arcade and play some games, you know, like we used to."

"That actually doesn't sound entirely awful, but you're totally just saying that because you want to beat me for once."

"You know, not *everything's* a competition, Max," he said.

"Whatever you say, Stalker..." she said with a knowing smile.

Until then, they flipped through some of Lucas' comic books, all snuggled up together. And the next day, he showed up, parked by her windowsill to avoid any conflict that might result from her very traditional, close-minded, stepdad knowing of their relationship. In his hands were a bouquet of flowers fresh from the market.

"What's all of *this*

"Oh, just a token of my affection..."

Through snorts, both syncopated and repressed, she tried to hold in her giggles, but instead broke out into laughter.

"Why are you laughing?" he asked.

"I just- *laughs more* I can't you take you seriously when you say things like that..."

"You wanted a date, I'm just trying to give you a memorable one!"

"Lucas, I'm flattered, but you don't have to try and be Mike for me! I love *you*, not *him*," she said, her hands sliding up his chest.

"Guess you're right...I mean, I don't mind it though. I'd be up to doing a little bit more of this, a little more alone time and a little less group dates," he said, his hands wrapping around her waist.

"Yeah, I wouldn't mind that either," she said with a smile.

"C'mon, MADMAX. Let's show this town who's boss!" he said, grabbing her hand and encouraging her to hop on.

"Your Mike impression was spot on by the way *laughs*...You nailed it! I think I liked it even more than the flowers!"

"*laughs* I've spent enough time with him to know his ways."

"I just don't see how you did it!" she teased.

Now at the arcade, they parked the bike and walked inside.

"Up for a little Dig Dug?" he asked.

"Always," she said with a smile.

Lucas had harvested all of the quarters he could muster in preparation for this date. He needed all of the chances to play he could get if he was really going to try and beat her top score! Max, on the other hand, was just waiting for the moment when Keith would sneak up behind them and make some lame, dorky remark, but he never did and then it occurred to her that he didn't work there anymore. Sure, he was a little obnoxious, but it wasn't the same without him disrupting every few minutes or so when she was in the zone and she couldn't help but miss it a little. As much as she hated to admit it, it was almost like she needed the distraction. It was part of her routine and now with him not there, she wasn't sure if she could beat Lucas, who had been practicing all summer. Even so, she still kicked his ass...like royally.

"You drive me mad, MADMAX," he said.

"I know," she said with a giddy smile.

"C'mon, Don Juan, let's grab something to eat," she continued, tugging on his shirtsleeve.

"Alright, Strawberry Shortcake," he said.

He loved the little pet nicknames they had for each other. It always left a smile on his face.

They walked around the block, with Max holding onto his arm with such warmth. There was something so wholesome about their relationship, but some people just didn't see it that way and among that innocence was a lot of hidden scars...

It was already hard enough with Neil watching Max's every move and Billy not there to detract attention away from her mistakes, but that didn't even begin to describe the hardships that Max and Lucas had to face as a couple. Sure, they were more low key about it than Mike and El, but part of the reason was that they had to be. You see, growing up in the time that they did, equality was still a very prevalent issue. Lucas hanging out with a group of white kids all the time was already seen as weird enough, but dating outside his race was a whole other story, an almost unheard-of thing at the time, especially for someone his age.

Stares and glares directed their way, insults exchanged in oodles of whispers. That was what it was like, everywhere they went. It was inevitable and unavoidable, but a reality for them that was, at times, too hard to ignore. But particularly that day.

As they walked into the diner, they were stopped by Troy, who ever since the incident with El had left them alone. Well, that was until high school came around. Now, things were different. He felt that since El had moved away and he didn't have her to worry about anymore, that he could go back to his old ways, teasing the boys like he used to. He had found new nicknames for them, to replace his juvenile-innovated ones from before. Now Midnight was replaced with something much worse...

"Hey! Hey, Oreol!" said Troy.

Lucas turns shoulder

Not Midnight- Oreol. That was his name now and while it might seem like a stupid pet nickname to some, it was with fowl intention, as

opposed to the oddly endearing "Stalker" or "Don Juan."

"Oreo? What's that supposed to mean?" Max asked, looking at Lucas for an answer.

"What do you think, Oreo? Who should tell her? You or me?"

"*sighs* He's saying I'm black on the outside and white on the inside, like an oreo...He means that for a black person, I act like I'm white," Lucas mumbled with his head down, then glaring at Troy.

"What is wrong with you, Troy? Why do you have to go out of your way to taunt him about things that you know aren't true?! Don't you have anything better to do with your life?"

"C'mon, Max. Let's just go."

"No, Lucas, I got this!"

"Damn, Oreo...Has she got you whipped or what? What a loser!" he said.

"And you wonder why you don't have a girlfriend, Troy?! Well, I got news for you- this is why," said Max.

"Oh, just put a sock in it, Carrot Top!"

"*chuckles* That's really the best you could come up with?! Why don't you pick on someone your own size for a change or better yet, NOT AT ALL! And seriously, what's up with the food names? What are you, in 1st grade or something?"

"You don't like that name? Okay, well would you prefer n-"

"Don't say it. Don't you dare say it..." she said aggressively, her fists balling up.

"Nig-"

POW! She clocked him, right in the nose. He could hear birds chirping, just like one would in a cartoon, and as he got dizzier, his scrawny little body collapsed to the ground.

"What the fuck?! You broke my nose, you bitch!" he yelled.

"What'd you just call her?" asked Lucas.

"Max, I called her Max. She likes being called that, right?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought, asshat," she said.

And she stood over him and said in the most Max Mayfield way possible:

"If you ever hurt my boyfriend, I'll break you. You got that?"

"Whatever."

And they thought everyone was looking at *them* for being together! Well, now it was for a whole different reason.

"That was kickass," said Lucas. "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," she humbly said. "C'mon, let's get out of here."

She was just the person he needed, the person who would stand up for him, the person who didn't put up with people's bullshit and would tell them off, whether it be via her strongly opinionated rants or by doing a fist dance on their face. She had guts and he loved that about her.

"Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

"Is that why we never go out anymore?"

"I mean, if I'm being honest, yeah, sometimes, but I really try to not let it get in the way because I love you and I want you to be happy."

"Well, that's why I'm asking...because I love *you* and I want *you* to be happy! I don't want you to get hurt, ever."

Meanwhile, Joyce had driven the kids out to Hawkins for a visit.

"Alright, well, here we are, kids," Joyce said, pulling up in front of

the motel.

"Um, Jonathan, Will, El, would you all mind getting the key card? I'll just be a minute," said Joyce, her voice giving out a little.

"Y-You guys go ahead," said El. "I'll catch up with you in a second."

"Something the matter, sweetie?"

"Yeah. With you," she said looking into her eyes and tilting her head with concern.

"Honey, I'm fine, don't you worry about me!"

"You don't have to be strong for me, Joyce. We've both been through our share of it."

"*sniffles* I just, I- *sighs* Every time I come back to this place, I think of him. I think of him and that stupid date we had set up and how he gave up his days to search for my son and saw to it that he got better when he was infected."

"I know. I feel it too. A part of me is happy, *tears roll* halfway happy. My friends are here, my family, but he was my family too...My first shot at a real family and it was ripped away from me."

"He may have been your family and I know it's not the same, but I can *shivers* assure you that I will be that as *best* as I can for you."

nods through tearful smiles, holds hand

"*holds chin* I love you, El."

"I love you too," she said, pulling her in for a sudden hug.

After checking in to the hotel, Will went to Dustin's house and El went to Mike's along with Jonathan, leaving Joyce free to do whatever it was that she pleased.

[Mike's Basement]

"Your mom said I might find you here," said El, walking up to the couch and plopping down right next to him.

"El!" he said, cupping her cheek in his hand and then hugging her. "What are you doing here?"

"I missed you, why else?"

And he reached out and grabbed her hand from her lap, bringing it to his face to kiss. Then, throwing his arm around her shoulders, he chuckled.

"What? What is it?"

"I think I just kissed my own hand."

"You *did*?" she asked, laughing.

"Well, you didn't feel it, did you?"

"I guess not, but I guess I was just a little distracted."

"By what?"

"The boy kissing it," she said, running her fingers through his hair.

And they gazed into each other's eyes like they were stars in the sky, feeling perfectly comfortable with each other in every sense of the word. But after hearing those words, those killer words come out of her mouth, Mike couldn't help but want to put his face on hers, his eyes fixating on her lips, the red dot in his optical illusion.

"Wait, *pulls away* what are we forgetting?" she asked.

"Music," he said, raising his finger in the air.

"Oh, you're so right! Well, what do you have?"

"I know just the thing," he said.

"Ooh, I love surprises!" she said.

"And presents too?" he asked, referring back to the conversation

when she first returned his love.

"Yeah. Presents too," she said softly, first smiling, then letting it fade along with her voice as he came nearer.

As they kissed, Lovesong by The Cure played in the background, lyrics which resonated with El strongly. Whenever she was alone with Mike, he made her feel at home. He made her feel like she was whole again and no matter how far away, no matter how long she'd stay, nor what words she'd say, she would always love him, just as the song said.

Mike sat up straight at first, both of his feet lying flat on the ground and his back to the couch. And El's head swiveled around his nose to meet his lips. He leaned into her chest, holding the shoulder of her arm which was wrapped around the back of his neck. Nearly curling up into a little ball, she clutched her body toward his, with her dainty little feet dangling off of his lap ever so sweetly and her legs folded at the kneecaps, forming a bridge above his.

Now existing among this manmade little nook of warmth and physical touch, they sunk into the blanketed cushions of the couch. The blade of his cheekbone came knocking into her face and she could feel her own lip beneath her nostrils, curling up to mesh with his. That was until they were rudely interrupted..

With no sense of privacy, Mrs. Wheeler barged through the basement, "gracing" them with her presence as she entered the room. With a basket in her hand, she proceeded to bend down, setting the clothes off to the side as she lowered the volume of the boombox.

"Hey sweetie," said Mrs. Wheeler.

Like two magnets repelled away by an unknown force, their lips immediately withdrew, realizing that Mike's mom had just joined their company. And quickly peeling themselves off each other, they split in opposite directions, with Mike on the floor facing the couch and El attempting to "act natural" while trying not to freak out. Quickly improvising, however, Mike said:

"*looks around floor and coffee table* Gosh, I don't see it anywhere!

Do you?" Mike asked El with a lot of eye contact.

"What are you doing?" she asked in a hushed voice.

"Just follow my lead," he replied in a soft whisper, as he snatched the couch cushions from under her and held them up in his arms.

"Oh, I uh- I dunno. Let me help you look," she said in a very robotic-sounding, almost scripted way.

They pretended to look for whatever fake object Mike acted like he had lost until Mrs. Wheeler left the room. The only problem was that she never did, not nearly as soon as he had thought she would at least.

"Whatcha looking for over there?" she asked.

El ungrasped the hand holding hers and on the spot, decided that she would slip Mike's watch off of his wrist, pretending that that was the thing that was missing.

"My uh- My watch," he said, with El placing it into his hand and folding his fingers over it.

He then quickly hid it and pretended to find it again. It was a diversion that went on far too long and pointlessly, but at least it passed some of the time that they aggravatedly waited for Mrs. Wheeler to leave.

Climbing back on the couch and situating himself next to El.

"I don't know who we were kidding. There's no way she couldn't have seen us," whispered Mike.

"*whispers* It's not like it's that big a deal. I mean, really, what's the worst she's gonna do?! She's no match for the rath of Hopper," said El.

"*whispers* True, very true."

As Mrs. Wheeler finished loading the washing machine, Mike huffed and puffed, sighing as they both sat and waited for what felt like an

eternity.

"Any day now..." he said, earning giggles from the girl beside him.

He banged his forehead into his palm repeatedly, eventually letting it sink into El's chest, where she kissed the top of it and ran her fingers through his hair so sweetly.

Mrs. Wheeler walks out

"Thank god, I thought she'd never leave," said El.

Mike liked this El, this El who prioritized her time with him and got bitter when it was taken away from her. They both were a little selfish for their own relationship because it was so important to them and it always seemed to come first in their book.

"Now, where were we? Oh, that's right!" he said with a suggestive smile.

And he looked her in the eyes with an eyebrow-raising smolder that was too enticing to neglect. Rather than steering clear of him, it steered her nearer, her face leaning in to meet his. And before she knew it, she was captured by his arms and invested in his kiss.

At the same time, Lucas and Max headed over to Dustin's house, claiming that they needed to have a party meeting asap without any indication of why. So, Dustin tried to reach Mike.

Beep. Static. A voice emerged.

"Mike, do you copy? This is Dustin, over."

"*sighs* Again?" Mike aggravatedly asked aloud.

Beep. Static.

"I repeat: Mike, do you copy? This is Dustin, over."

And they both lazily reached their arms out to grab ahold of it, their hands touching in the process, with Mike's first instinct being to shut it off and El's to respond to their friends.

"Let go of it, you goof!" she said, fighting over possession of the supercomm.

"No way, José!" he replied.

"C'mon, Mike! Seriously, just quit it already."

"Only if you say the magic word..." he said in a sing-songy voice.

"Oh, get bent!" she said, throwing him to the ground with an accidental flick of the head.

Thud. She felt bad for the sudden burst of force that jerked his scrawny little body to the ground with a mind of its own.

"*gasps* Mike!" she said, rushing to his side.

However, after seeing a shocked Mike lying below her, she couldn't help but find some hilarity in it too. And like a turtle crawling back into its shell, her bottom lip retreated behind the top, pushing air out through the slight gap of her mouth in a hushed laugh.

"Oh my god, are okay?" she continued through laughs.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said, laughing along with her.

"You sure?" she asked with raised eyebrows.

"*nods* Promise."

"*smiles* Here, let me help you up," she said, grabbing his hand.

"And how am I supposed to know that you won't try something like that again?" he asked, not budging from the floor.

"*smiles* It won't, don't worry."

"Or..." he said.

"Or what?" she asked, helping him up halfway.

"You could do something like that again, you know, just to spice things up. Just an idea...*exhales in a breathy laugh* I don't know, I

probably sound crazy to you."

With her face close to his, she continued to hold him up by his right hand, as if to help him to his feet, but then, letting go of her grip, she flattened her hand, her fingers webbed and curling as she gently slammed him back to the ground. It was similar to the way Billy pretended to help Steve up at the basketball court only to drop him like he was nothing. The only difference here was that the driving force behind this conflict was not testosterone-driven aggression, but was rather driven by El's powers themselves. Consumed by the desire to shake things up with a little excitement and spontaneity, he looked her up and down, examining the position they were in. His eyes were wide with surprise and his mouth unhinged with awe, knowing that there was just so much potential that lied behind that stare they held.

"Are you sure you can handle it?" she asked.

nods vigorously

"You're in for a wild ride, *pauses* Wheeler," she said confidently, raising her eyebrows to signify the irony in his last name at that very moment.

Before losing himself in a series of kisses, he reached an arm out, feeling around the floor for his supercomm.

compresses antenna, flips switch

"He shut it off! That son of a-" Dustin reported back to Lucas in outrage.

Just Like Heaven by The Cure plays in the background

Though Mike's idea, El's execution was even more perfect than imaginable. If he was a puppet, then she was the master. Of course, with streaks of red dripping from her nose like a leaky pipe, she could only manipulate his movements in moderation, but always managed to throw him curveballs every now and then and when he would least expect her to. However, all it took was a wipe of the noseblood and by then, they were back at it again.

Like the plucking of strings, she teased him with the faux sensation of

her fingers against his skin, the illusion of her caresses so powerful that he struggled to tell the difference between the actual feeling of her touch and the one governed by her powers. And through fling and pull, push to shove, snuggle and nuzzle lied much tension and love.

Guided by the power of her mind, his arm levitated along with her thoughts. And the palm of his hand came parachuting down onto the side of her neck, situating itself in place as she repositioned his lips onto hers. With silent concentration, she would join and pry their lips together and apart, the laugh lines of his face bunching together with each tweeting pucker. His kiss was a light touch that deepened in pillowy pressure as it progressed.

[Back at Dustin's House]

"Let's just show up. We know he's there," said Lucas.

"Lucas is right. I mean, really what's the worst that could happen?" asked Max.

"Lots of things!" Dustin argued.

"Name one," said Lucas.

"Okay, um..."

"Oh, here we go again!" said Max, throwing her hands up in the air.

"No one asked you," Lucas teased.

"Meh!" she said mockingly, shaking her head and sticking her tongue out at him.

"Guys, guys, c'mon! We're getting way off track here," said Will.

"Right. Let's go then," said Lucas.

Not long after that, the boys and Max headed over to Mike's house, peaking through the basement windows before they came in.

"I don't see him in there," said Lucas.

"Wait, Will, where's El? Do you know?" asked Max.

"I'm pretty sure she was supposed to come here today," he said.

"You think they're making out somewhere?" asked Dustin.

"Most definitely," said Lucas.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Just open the door already," Lucas continued.

"And interrupt them?"

"Well, it wouldn't be the first time!" Lucas remarked, referring to Dustin's terrible timing.

"What's that supposed to mean?!"

"Oh my god, who cares, just open the damn door, nerd!" said a familiar, sassy voice.

"*HUH?*" they all said in unison, turning around only to find that Erica was there with them.

"Erica! What the hell are you doing here?!" asked Lucas.

"I'm in the party now...I mean, that *was* what the Dungeons & Dragons game was for, right?"

"What? No! No, it was just a gesture."

"You sure about that?"

"Pretty damn sure!" said Lucas. "How did you find us anyway?"

"I followed you, DUH!"

"But why?"

"I don't know, I was bored!"

"Does Mom even know where you are right now?"

raise eyebrows, shrugs

"*sighs, touches forehead with thumb and index finger* Erica, just go home."

"*sighs* Fine, but it's getting dark outside and if anything happens to me, I'm telling Mom whose fault it was!"

"Fine, see if I care," he said.

"Hold up! Last year, at the Snow Ball, all of you had dates or at least someone your own age to dance with, but I didn't. Instead, I got rejected by every girl I approached. Now, Nancy was kind enough to dance with me so that I didn't feel left out, but now we're put in kind of the same position she was in. So, no, we're not gonna do my girl Erica like that...I don't care if she is younger! She's one of us now..." said Dustin, placing both hands on her shoulders and shaking them with welcoming emphasis.

"You can take the scoop out of the troop, but you can't take the troop out of the scoop!" she said with a smirk.

"Damn right! *high fives* You can't spell America without the Erica either," Dustin joked with a wink.

Erica giggles

"What *pauses* is happening right now?" asked Lucas.

"Friendship, that's what. *high fives Dustin*"

"Ay ay ay..." said Lucas. "This is going to be a LONG 4 years!"

"Well, now that we've established *that*..." said Max, eyeing Dustin and the door with her eyes.

"*sighs* Here goes nothing," said Dustin, finally opening the door.

With El nowhere to be found and Mike nowhere to be seen, well, not from the window at least, they all assumed that they were probably just upstairs trading faces or something, but they never expected to find them both on the floor of the basement, canoodling.

"See, what'd I tell you," said Lucas.

"*clears throat* Ehem!" said Max.

They didn't move a muscle. Knowing they were caught, they remained glued to one another's faces. El held onto Mike's lip with fervor, but as the two slowly realized they were being watched, the thin edge of her lip glided off of his and let go with a click as it retracted back to stillness. Like two fallen dominos that had somehow magically set themselves back into place, El pulled herself up with Mike, each directing their attention towards their friends. And the two stared in their direction awkwardly, with wide eyes and gaping mouths.

Clinging to the tips of her eyelashes, El's hair was in complete disarray. However, with one fist clenching Mike's shirt, she used the other to move a piece of hair out of the way, which ended up falling right back into place, just as the same eyebrow-raised expression remained on her face. Sure, El's hair may have been a frizzy, fuzzy, tangled mess, but Mike's was practically a haystack of static, looking especially poofy from all of the tousling that went on. And sensing this by all of the strange looks he was receiving, he tossed it to the side with a jerk of the head.

"What in tarnation is going on here?!" Dustin hysterically asked.

"Oh, um, hi guys...What's up?" El asked, removing herself from Mike's warm, tempting arms as they fixed themselves up and jumped to their feet.

"Too busy to answer, huh?" asked Will, directing his question towards Mike.

"Whoops!" said Mike like a question, throwing his arms up with a funny expression across his face.

"Didn't seem like an accident to me..." Erica remarked under her breath.

"Okay, who invited her here?" asked Mike, annoyed.

"Don't look at me!" said Lucas, throwing his hands up in innocence.

"Fine. What's this about anyway?"

"I thought it was about time we had a party meeting," said Lucas.

"Well, I'm glad you said that. I was just about to suggest the same," said Mike.

"Oh really? Was that before or after you were playing tonsil tennis with your girlfriend?"

"Alright, that's enough, Lucas. El's your friend too, you know," said Max.

"Yeah, I know...you're right. Sorry, El. I didn't mean it like that."

"It's okay," she said.

"Wait- What the- E-El...Why-Why's your nose bleeding?"

"Oh. *That*," she said, first looking at Max, then at Mike with a smile.

"Well, I didn't want to make a big deal out of it because I didn't want to jinx it, but I've been gaining some of my powers back little by little...I am sorry for not sharing it with you all sooner though."

"I knew it!" said Will.

"Yeah, how did you not figure it out sooner? You literally live with me!"

"I don't know...We both keep to ourselves."

"True," said El.

"Aww, El, that's great! I'm so happy for you!" said Max, catching her in a hug.

"Yeah," said Lucas. "Wait, why is it bleeding?"

"Um, well, we were making out and-"

"You used your powers on him?!" asked Dustin.

"Maybe just a little bit..." she said, making a pinch with her fingers.

"Which would explain the smudge on his lip- I just assumed it was El's lipstick," said Max.

"Wait, what?" he asked, wiping it off.

"So, you made him do things...with your mind?" asked Dustin.

"That's what surprises you?! I'm just surprised they didn't think of it sooner," said Lucas.

"Well, El's not the only one with a bloody nose..." said Max.

"What do you mean?" asked Will.

"Lucas, can I tell them?"

"Tell us what?" asked Erica.

"Yeah, you can tell them," he said first eyeing Erica, then answering Max.

"Okay, well, today, Lucas and I were hanging out around town and we walked into the diner to grab some food, when all of a sudden, Troy pops out of nowhere, first calling Lucas 'Oreo' and suggesting that he's "white on the inside" and then starting to call him a, you know."

Erica's head goes down

"No, no, I don't know," said El.

Mike motioned her over with his hand and explained through whispers in her ear.

"Oh..." she said.

"Shit...Lucas, we're really sorry that you had to go through that, man," said Dustin.

"No, it's okay."

"Well, it's never okay, even though you still have to put up with it," said Mike.

"Yeah, seriously, man. We've all been through a lot these past few years, more than a lot, but you most of all and we don't acknowledge that nearly enough."

"Thanks, guys. Means a lot."

"Bring it in, guys," said Will, sensing a bro hug moment.

hugs

"Hate to cut this bromance short, but what about this related to a bloody nose?" asked Erica.

"Oh right!" said Max. "Let's just say that I didn't let him finish the word because I punched him, right in the nose."

"Holy shit!" said Dustin.

"Not bad for a white girl," Erica said with a smirk.

"Thanks," Max said with a sisterly nod of the head.

"So, Mike, what'd *you* wanna have a party meeting for?"

"Well, I'm glad you asked, Dustin!" he said, cheerily, like a teacher answering a class question. "*clears throat* Well, now that all of you know about El's powers, it's time we tell you about the research we've been doing."

"Research! What *kind* of research?" asked Erica.

"About her powers. We came to the conclusion that they were caused by all of the LSDs that were fed to her mom in MKUltra. We just haven't figured out what controls them yet. That's the last step, but the way I see it, if we all put our heads together, maybe we could figure this thing out."

"But why is that important, to figure out what controls them?" asked Will.

"I don't know, I just feel like we might be able to figure out how to get all of them back if we knew how they formed in the first place."

"Well, do you have any working theories?" asked Lucas.

"Yeah, actually."

"You do?" asked El.

"Well, sorta."

"Sorta?" asked Max.

"*sighs* I was thinking- *pauses* You know how we started talking about mutations in Bio?"

"Yeah," said Dustin.

"Well, what if this whole thing, it's a mutation?"

"*sighs* Elaborate," said Lucas.

"Back at Starcourt, when that thing was in her leg, she lost a lot of blood. The thing even sucked some out of it! And then whenever she uses her powers, her nose bleeds, so maybe her powers are laced in her blood."

"Your point?" asked Lucas.

"As her body replaces the lost blood, she is slowly gaining them back."

"How is that though? First, you said it was a mutation that caused them and now you're saying that they're connected to my blood somehow?" asked El.

"Mutations are genetic. DNA can be found in your white blood cells, but when you lose blood-"

"You only lose your red blood cells," said Dustin.

"Precisely! So maybe your powers actually come from your blood, even though your brain is the one that actually controls them, but think about it! Blood has to go to the brain in order for it to work. So, if your powers are found in and connected to your blood-"

"Then maybe it sucked the powers out of her blood and as she lost more of it, she lost more of her powers as a result," said Max, who once proved to be the party's very own nurse.

"That would make sense because red blood cells help you replenish blood, but El's been kind of experiencing anemic-like symptoms back at home, which means her iron levels have been low and she hasn't made as many red blood cells because of that. BUT people traditionally eat a lot of meat on holidays, like turkey on Thanksgiving and ham on Christmas, both of which are foods filled with iron. So, now that your iron levels are creeping back up and she's back in Hawkins, surrounded by the people she loves and that love her-" said Mike.

"She's starting to show signs of them again," said Dustin.

"I don't think it's just the mutations or the blood. I think that you've learned to rely on people and your powers have adapted. You feel motivated by the people around you to some extent and we're always counting on you, but that's a lot of pressure. And when you're not around us, you're isolated again, just like the lab, but no one is forcing you to use your powers because your new town is not as demanding, so you're numb to the ability to use them in full," Mike said, directing his proposition toward El.

"So, then it's all three. The mutation, the blood, and the motivation?" she asked.

"I think so, yes."

"Working theory, huh?" asked Lucas. "Seems to me you've got everything figured out."

"Well, I didn't want to toot my own horn or anything, but yeah, pretty much."

"So now what?" asked Will.

"As amusing as I find this theory to be, I have one tiny problem with it- it's bullshit," said Erica, not buying it for one second.

"Erica!" Lucas yelled.

"What? I'm just stating a fact!"

"Well, please, if you have a better idea then I'd love to hear it," said Mike, crossing his arms.

"How am I supposed to know?! I'm eleven!"

"Um, I beg to differ!" said El, earning some laughs.

Once the rest of the gang had left, there was none left but Mike and El. It always seemed to work out that way- Mike and El and no one else. Who's to say whether or not it's a coincidence.

"Well, that was something, wasn't it?"

"*exhales laughingly* You could say that again!"

"I'm really feeling for Lucas though, you know...That's just so fucked up. *shakes head* I hate that they give him that shit," said Mike.

"I know! Those-Those- mouthbreathers!" El exclaimed.

"Worse than that...They're flat out racist!"

"You're right, mouthbreather just doesn't cut it...Those-Those-MOUTHFUCKERS!"

Mike's lips vibrated as he attempted to hold in his laughter.

"What? What's so funny?"

"El, you-you can't say that..." he said, continuing to laugh.

"Why not?"

"Be-Because adding 'mouth' to the beginning of every word or 'fucker' to the end of a word doesn't automatically make it a bad word. 'Mouthbreather' and 'motherfucker' are two separate insults that don't and shouldn't ever mix."

"Okay, but why is 'motherfucker' a word then if it actually means fucking your mom?"

"Well, that's not how it's used or it's just been accepted as an insult I guess."

"So, let me get this straight: You can call someone a motherfucker even if they haven't actually fucked your mom, but you can't call someone a mouthfucker just for the hell of it."

"Correct."

"That doesn't make any sense..."

"What can I say...English is weird!"

"Yeah, I'll say!"

"But El, the real reason you can't say it is because it means-" he said, cutting himself off to whisper in her ear.

"Oh," she said, having trouble holding in her own giggles.

"Yeah..." he said, with wide eyes and raised eyebrows.

"Well, this awkward..." she said, laughing nervously and fanning her now blushed face.

"Little bit!" said Mike, nodding, again with wide, almost bug-like eyes.

"Well, let's change the subject, shall we?!" she then said.

"Gladly!"

lifts ups wrist

"*sighs* I hate that I have to leave soon," she said after checking his watch.

"Quit checking the time! Don't think about that...Think about *this*. *holds hand* Think about *us*. Right here, right now."

"I am," she said. "It's all I think about! At home, in the car, and here most of all."

No one had bought it, no one would dare touch it. It was haunted, they said, everyone in that town. And that is precisely why Joyce Byers decided to pay her old house a visit because it was *her* house and it always would be. Because she didn't have any adult friends left to talk to, or so she thought...

She never thought she would, but something was telling her she should. And coming inside, she walked around, revisiting all of the things that happened in that house. All of those memories began replaying in her head like plot recaps in a soap opera, the most notable one being when she communicated to Will through the lights, but just as this thought crossed her mind, a sinking feeling overcame her. She started seeing things that she never in a million years thought she would see again- flickering lights. First, it was the lamp, then the other lamp, then the overhead, and so on, all leading her over to the cabinet where she had hidden the string of Christmas lights.

The kids were not aware of the fact that she had been in contact with Murray again. She tried to involve them as little as possible, and while she wanted nothing more than to put it all behind her- Hawkins, Hopper, and the horror that came from it all, she just couldn't seem to refrain from her old ways.

After seeing him explode before her very eyes, she thought she had convinced herself that Hop was gone for good, but then Murray showed up at her doorstep with a long-ass theory to bore her with, except that it wasn't boring. It wasn't boring at all! It was quite interesting in fact.

His theory was that Hopper somehow escaped through a gap in the gate and that maybe he even ended up in a base in Kamchatka, under the custody of Russian guards. He thought this because the machines were all designed by the Russians and Russia wasn't exactly close to Hawkins, so they had to have some way of passage.

He then explained that his phone number, which Hopper had so carelessly given away over the phone wasn't just any phone number. He reserved it specifically because the numbers in it could be separated and flipped around into Russian coordinates. They were very hard for him to obtain, but he had purposefully set it up this

way so that he would never lose those numbers, as he knew they would come to use someday and he was right.

Over the months, they did much undercover work and conversed over the phone with not much progress or success. Joyce was still so caught up in the theory that she even thought that Billy might have been the one talking to her through the lights. She even asked them directly, only to find two blinks following her question. Joyce had a lot of problems with Murray's theory to begin with, but she was willing to entertain any possibility and explore all of her options if it meant seeing Hop again. And just as they had almost lost all hope of finding him, she was convinced again by the lights, which at first, refused to confirm their identity, but instead left it all to a single phrase shown upon the alphabet wall which revealed it all- 3 inches.

"*shaky, panting breath* H-H-H-Hop?" she cried.